

Jasmina Tesanovic

Women's Tribunal, Sarajevo 2015

I am a Woman in Black from Belgrade. I was one of the organizers of the the first feminist conference in East Europe, Drug-ca Zena in 1978 in Belgrade. I am also the author of "The Diary of the Political Idiot," maybe the first war diary written by a woman distributed over the Internet.

In 2005, I happened to be in New York at the UN Conference. Beijing Ten Years After. I have to tell you about my very weird, conflictual role there. On one hand I was representing the group Women in Black Serbia. On the other at a certain point I became the representative of the Serbian government since the official one didn't manage to get to the conference. She asked me to speak in her name.

At the same time, since I was in the US, I was an active member of Code Pink women for peace group. Code Pink literally crashed into the UN building during the 8th of March street protest.

The UN meeting was bullied by the Bush administration representatives, acting together with satellite countries. In the severe conditions of America's War on Terror they all voted just as they were told. While women's autonomous feminist groups had their underground parallel and alternative session presided by Charlotte Bunch an activist and academic writer. They were trying to stop or at least make public, the misdoings of Bush Administration official. In the meantime the government groups, who were anti-abortion fundamentalists, tried to remove the freedom of choice option from the woman's platform from 1995 in Beijing the freedom of choice option. They also wanted remove the inclusion of women's human rights in from the UN Millennium development goals.

I remember running up and down the corridors and stairs informing about the sly rapid moves of the official sessions. They were collecting votes more or less illegally. I caught them red handed trying to steal the vote from Serbia while I was in the basement.

However, after three days of bitter struggle, we managed to prevent this aggression and save our rights almost intact. The irony was that an official woman from the US government was praising women's human rights in Iraq. She meant their rights to wedding gowns. Thanks to the internet and their yankee liberators, Iraqi women could order their wedding gowns from all over the world, cut and assigned as they please by major designers!

We disrupted that press conference with banners against US military intervention. We walked the streets of NY talking to women cops who wanted to stop us, about the importance of 8th of March, woman humans rights, peace and justice.

Well ten years after that turmoil, today, I look back on those days as on romantic times. In these modern days of relentless terrorism and state terror, its clear that woman are the ultimate target of many social disasters. The repression is very open. But, with their awakened conscience and activist skills, women also have the biggest chance of saving the dignity of all in this the dark era.

I remember the life of one of my cousins, an older woman. As a kid she took care of sheep in a small Balkan village. Later she worked in a beer factory , then buried her husband who deserted the war and committed suicide after taking part in the atrocities, being on the wrong side in Bosnia.

My cousin talked to me after watching satellite news for the first time in her life. She said: there is so much injustice and bloodshed in the world. And I knew nothing about it. I just thought I was somebody who was unlucky.

That woman, then and now, women like her, those are the new heroines of our times. They are the queens of a fallen globalized world, kingdoms of patriarchal wars and cultures. And their women' s platform has much more in common than their agendas connected to ethnic or nationalist movements.

When the wars in the Balkans started in the nineties, it was only women who reacted with peace making initiatives. Especially in Serbia, since Belgrade was the center of evil, the capital from which everything started. We had to do something about it. Even if we were disorganized, like four cats as we say in Italian, it worked. It broke through the chain of denial of silent majority , the Serbian citizens. I could give you numerous examples from women's stories I collected running all over the world, talking to refugees from former Yugoslavia, from Bosnia, Hungary Serbia to Saint Louis Missouri. All these stories were published in a book called Suitcase (California University Press, 1996)

Once the peace treaties were signed, the women again were shoved under the carpet. This is what always happens after wars, but this time it didn't succeed altogether. The wars always show blatantly the disgraces of the so called peace, especially when women are concerned. Women's bodies as war territories, as litmus for democracy and peace.

For example, thanks to world activist and brave women' s testimonies for the first time in history rape in war was criminalized. It is treated now as torture or crime against humanity in the war tribunal in the Hague.

After the September 11, 2001 and then world economic crisis in 2008 , those and other human rights issues were just swallowed by the globalization of the balkanization. The political transition after the fall of Milosevic, in my country Serbia

became a transition to nowhere. The global warming catastrophes, tsunami or earthquake in Japan besides the armed conflicts equalize the rich and the poor. Death makes us equal. But we women don't equalize death terror and wars with the very nature of life. That is our advantage in the 21 century after many centuries of disadvantage.

Our governments didn't do much about any of the issues which, as Hannah Arendt said, made the rapes and killings possible. Instead they focused only on the instrumentalization of the victims story, especially women's, who survived their men.

So we woman decided to make a difference. These brave witnesses from all over the region, of different nationalities, ethnic and religious background were summoned by Women in Black to the regional meetings and conferences in order to tell their stories. So that these stories could be recorded, in order to make their stories visible.

The postwar peace never dealt with the past. The peace did not confront the perpetrators of war, making a lustration of the aggressive state system, or ever doubt the moral values of the ethnic war criminal heroes.

All those stories have been a platform for justice. Women's personal accounts, their painful coming out, basically crystalized four different groups of crime: ethnicity, economical, militaristic and gender/sexual. Women's concept of justice is based on harmony between emotions and principles not only on objective facts recited in war crime courts.

In the focus, we have a woman who survived. She is telling us what she saw and did, and her own voice creates an alternative history. Male and mainstream history does not have a continuous story of resistance, it is a discourse of conflicts and ideologies. But the fact of spending time together with witnesses brings a new level of knowledge, especially among themselves.

Some women need to stay in a group, some want personal treatment, some need a friend, some a therapist, but not one felt sorry for doing it. They see personal pressures from their family members who are afraid for their lives. They get political intimidations from the national institutions which see their stories as an uncomfortable interference for their work. But the women's court from the Balkans will persist and spread.

I will give you a brief outline of the origin of the women's court from the Balkans. As you well know there were several other significant precedents all over the world since last century but this is the first one in Europe.

Our late feminist Zarana Papić, my personal friend from childhood, who ideated the first feminist conference in East Europe I mentioned, in 2001 with Korin Kumar spoke about initiating the women's court for the crimes in ex Yu. It was after the fall of Milosevic when we still had some hope for a better future. But the idea didn't catch on, I guess because we hoped the new state itself would deal with the crimes.

Only in 2006 when Milosevic died behind the bars in the Hague without being sentenced or found guilty, we got upset about the delay and the obscurity. We made a series of interviews with the women. At the time I was following the trial against the paramilitary group Scorpions in Belgrade. Women survivors from Srebrenica were the brave witnesses who came to identify their dead and also to testify in the court. That Scorpion group was one of many armed militia groups who committed the genocide in the region. Those women were the famous mothers of Srebrenica who even today cannot say they got anywhere near the moral or social and material justice.

In a workshop with them in those days I suggested that the remains of Milosevic should be scattered in mass graves with the scattered bones of thousands of his victims. At the same time a regional commission REKOM was established to collect the facts and memories and establish ground for peace and reconciliation in the region. But Women in Black did better: we noticed that the gender perspective was not represented in that commission.

So since 2010 a regional initiative run by Women in Black from Serbia started organizing seminars, meetings with women from groups from Kosovo, Croatia Slovenia, Bosnia Macedonia. On our website you can see the numerous initiatives that were done since then all over the region. Besides groups and witnesses and experts we also have artists and performers joining the initiative.

The last one being in Vojvodina a month ago which was also the biggest one: about 50 women, three days of brainstorming and preparations for the public coming out which will be in Sarajevo May 9th. Women will testify, the jury made of experts women will put the stories of the witnesses in a political and historic context. Then a general conclusion will be drawn with recommendations. The trial will be public, 200 people are expected but I am afraid not a lot of proper, mainstream publicity.

The sensational aspect of a genocide, of creating a victim star who will raise world empathy for 5 minutes, this is the usual dead end which we must avoid. Too much blood, too much injustice, too much work has been invested to let it flow down the river of indifference.

Of course we are witnesses every day of the same troubles in other parts of the world. Terrorism in a university of Africa, killing 150 students, makes no particular impact on European or North American intellectual conscience. Thousands of women in Nigeria are abducted and kidnapped, and Ukraine has a million civilian refugees. Thousands of North Africans flee war in Maghreb to reach Italy, of course we are aware of this.

But our wars are our duties. The original principle of Women in Black (all of them) never present before in the history of pacifism is to fight against our own military, to clean our own courtyard first. A precious theory which tells us to start from a scratch, from our emotions, our own bodies.

Simone Weil said: in cases of utmost turmoil of values one can trust only one's own emotions. We did that but we are standing on the shoulders of those isolated witnesses recorded (even badly) in mainstream history, from Cassandra to Antigone, in order to build a code of different justice.

I will conclude with the words of some of these witnesses. Let them speak for themselves and for me too.

-Fifty mothers who had two sons and husbands today are alone. My life story is long. I have spoken out publicly about it. No fear anymore, maybe because of all that i have been through.

-Our life is going on as if the war stopped only yesterday. But it is not our fault. It's the world that is ruling it . Some things have been done. Many things we will do too. We have children, they are networking all over the world, they speak languages, write books...

-The biggest injustice we encounter is the denial of genocide to us who were the victims, in 1992 or 1995 both. There is no future or life together until we clear the ground. Today our dead have their names and graves but we want the names of those who killed too!

-It's hard to talk, to stick to only one event. You can write a book based only on one day!

-Women's Tribunal means a lot to us victims from Bosnia and Hercegovina. Especially if it starts working!

-I staid alive to talk. How can the responsible be punished if we don't talk?

-All women here are missionaries. It is an honor to be with them. Women are continuing the mission of humanity and justice and human rights.

-You need a lot of strength to survive all those humiliations and stay normal. One needs to fight. To have a goal and reach it. I am doing nowadays only things that make me happy, if i am happy here i will come to the tribunal too. I am not afraid anymore. I am proud. I cannot forgive. Especially i cannot forget.

-We have to think hard in the future and tell the stories. I want to raise my voice to be heard until the end of the world.

-As of today i don't know what happened to my husband or where he is. But I have only one wish: to rebuild our house in memory of three people who were burned there and call it the House of Pride.

-We are women who fight for justice, i will always live in solidarity with these women. Together we can laugh and cry. I only wish that this group of women would rule the world.

My tragedy is that the government and the state have betrayed me, i am living in European Croatia in a room of 12 sq meters without facilities. Is that a home?

-Women s activism helped me a lot. I wanna be part of the group. There are women in Macedonia who have a lot to say. But nobody asks them anything or talks to them at all.

-I am ashamed of part of my people. In the parliament they told me that i am betraying Slovenia, but i am only saying the truth.

-I survived a lot of pain, but i have a rebellious character. I did nothing wrong. I just wanted to stand against injustice and that is why i am now banned from society. My husband forbade me to be an activist. But i persisted because i knew it is the right way.

-I am happy to be part of women in black even though i didn't feel the war on my skin, the war witnesses make me a better person.

We managed to get paid thanks to our our hunger strike!

-I am still looking for peace and a life. I am looking for a solution here with you because you are listening to me, i want a change to stop the crime.