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BISER: A Conversation with Bosnian Women Living In Exile

*by Diana Kapidzic and Aida Daidzic**
translated and edited by Sara Kurlich

Diana Kapidzic and Aida Daidzic are founding members of BISER, a feminist human rights organization established by Bosnian women in response to the war against their country and its women. BISER has chapters in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Germany, and the United States. The following is a compilation of various speeches, talks, and interviews delivered by the two women during their fall 1993 U.S. tour.¹

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AIDA DAIDZIC and DIANA KAPIDZIC: In the fall of 1993, we traveled across the United States as part of BISER's international campaign of assistance and advocacy on behalf of women from Bosnia-Herzegovina (Bosnia). We came to America because, unlike most Bosnian women, we were fortunate enough to have the opportunity to travel. More specifically, however, we wanted to talk directly to American women about our experiences as Bosnians, as women, and as members of BISER.

* Ms. Kapidzic, a graduate of fine arts institutions in Sarajevo and Munich, is an artist and human rights activist. Before the war, Diana divided her time between Bosnia and Germany. She currently lives in Munich, Germany.

Ms. Daidzic is an architect and a graduate of the University of Sarajevo and the University of Zagreb, where she completed her post-graduate studies and training. She currently lives in Frankfurt, Germany.

"Biser" means "pearl" in the Bosnian language.

1. These materials were significantly edited for publication. Some of the material was translated from the Bosnian language into English by Sara Kurlich, Submissions Editor, *Hastings Women's Law Journal*, 1994-95.

For those of you who missed the opportunity to talk with us while we were in the United States, we have provided the *Hastings Women's Law Journal* with materials from our speaking engagements, including the speeches we delivered at Hastings College of the Law, to share with the feminist community in the United States. If you would like more information about BISER or would like to communicate with our members directly, we have also provided information about BISER's main office in Germany and our U.S. chapter.

We appreciate your support for our efforts and thank you for allowing us to share our stories with you.

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DIANA: I was in Germany during the spring of 1992 when the shelling of Sarajevo began. I recall listening to the news on German radio and feeling the pain and panic invade my senses. It seemed that all I could do at first was desperately phone my family and friends in Bosnia.

Despite all the media coverage of the war in Bosnia, these telephone calls were my best source of news during the first few months of the war. And though the media reported many incredible stories, what I heard on the telephone with family and friends was often even more disturbing.

I remember a conversation I had with a childhood friend in Sarajevo several weeks after the war began. She told me about a family she had met recently who had traveled by foot to Sarajevo from a small, rural village some distance outside of the city. The family came from a place where journalists did not go, a village that no longer exists. The family told her about the massacre of its relatives and neighbors, about rapes and castrations, and about the wanton destruction of its village.

At first I simply refused to believe it. I found it inconceivable that such horrors were happening today in Bosnia. In my Bosnia. And yet, could I deny the grief in my friend's voice? She cried and said, "Do something, Diana, anything you can, regardless of how insignificant it may seem to you. But most of all tell the world what I just told you, tell the world because when they find out, they will put a stop to this."

I last spoke to my friend in July 1992, three months after the siege of Sarajevo began, and days before all telephone lines into the city were cut by the Serbs who surrounded Sarajevo.

AIDA: By coincidence, I was also in Germany when the war against Bosnia began. I was not in contact with Diana at the time. But we later discovered that she and I, like other Bosnians in exile, shared similar experiences at the beginning of the war.

At times it seemed like we were all obsessed: constantly calling family and friends back home, listening to the news at all hours, and frantically buying up newspapers at kiosks. At other times disbelief and despair overwhelmed us.

During those first few months, a period that I can only describe as somehow disconnected from reality, I seem to remember best a brief but emotional conversation I had with my dearest aunt in Sarajevo. Before we said our goodbyes, she whispered to me, sadly, "You must do something, Aida, otherwise we will really be silenced forever."

Diana and I often mention our early telephone contacts with friends and family back home. These conversations were vital, not only as a source of news, but also as a source of inspiration and sanity for all of us, both inside and outside Bosnia, held hostage by this war.

DIANA: For some Bosnians, fear and grief in the "community in exile" quickly translated into a sort of collective paralysis. This feeling of helplessness at the unfolding calamity back home was contagious and the fear of its debilitating character contributed to my need to act. So, together with some friends, I started to organize rallies and lectures in Germany. I also began to meet with other Bosnian women, including Aida, who shared a belief that we had to work together in order to be effective.

Before long a group of Bosnian women from all different ethnic and religious backgrounds formed BISER. Our initial activities included both political activism and humanitarian efforts aimed at providing relief to the tide of Bosnian refugees fleeing the aggressor.

AIDA: The women of BISER represent all of Bosnia's various communities: Muslims, Christians, Jews, and others. The multi-ethnic, multi-religious composition of BISER is nothing new to Bosnians. Many here in the United States do not know that Bosnia is the oldest multi-cultural state in Europe. For almost six hundred years, various ethnic and religious groups have coexisted and intermingled in Bosnia. One example of this intermingling is Bosnia's rate of intermarriage, about ten percent, the highest among the former Yugoslav republics.

DIANA: Although it was not extraordinary for us as Bosnian women of different ethnic and religious backgrounds to come together to help Bosnia, in many ways it was vital that this coming together happened. From the beginning, Bosnia's aggressors have inaccurately but convincingly depicted our country as one full of "ancient ethnic hatreds." BISER is just one example of how outrageous this notion is to most Bosnians.

AIDA: During our speaking engagements across Europe and the United States, I often describe Diana as a "classic Bosnian." Diana's family is part Muslim, Jewish, and Christian Orthodox. In many ways BISER is about struggling to save women like Diana, women who do not fit into the simple ethnic and religious classifications that have characterized the debates on Bosnia.

For most Bosnians to be Bosnian is to live in harmony with many identities. To outsiders these identities may appear to be irreconcilable, but to Bosnians they are accepted as normal.

DIANA: I am often troubled by talk of "ethnicity" in the context of Bosnia. Yes, it is true that Bosnia is home to many religions. We are very proud of this longstanding fact. But it is also true that the overwhelming number of Bosnians are "South Slavs." That is, most Bosnians have a common ancestor, share a common history, and speak a common language in the same dialect. The one cultural aspect which distinguishes us from each other — religion — pales next to the many which bind us. It is almost impossible to distinguish one Bosnian from another, especially in the urban areas.

Since "ethnicity" has little genuine meaning in Bosnia, classifying Bosnians by ethnicity is an artificial exercise. I know that in the United States it is acceptable to be identified, for example, as an Italian-American. But to speak of a Bosnian Serb is redundant and artificial. One is either a Serbian Orthodox or a Bosnian Orthodox, not a Bosnian Serb.

AIDA: To talk of difference among Bosnians is to exaggerate difference. To exaggerate difference is to exploit it. Difference is a powerful ideological weapon, one which Serbian nationalists have employed with great success throughout the former Yugoslavia.

As a tool of Serbian nationalism, difference is used to unite like-minded nationalists and to justify terror and aggression against non-Serbs. Difference also capitalizes on religious and ethnic stereotyping. This explains why Serbian nationalists, alert to anti-Islamic sentiments in the West, consistently describe Bosnian Muslims as fundamentalists, religious deviants, or traitors to European Christianity.

Ultimately, however, the ideology of difference as employed by Serbian nationalists necessitates separation of Serbs from non-Serbs. In Bosnia, difference motivates and justifies aggression, murder, rape, and torture, all of which then mandate separation of aggressor from victim.

Thus, in the name of difference, Serbian nationalists legitimize their crimes and demand segregation, which in Bosnian terms means the partition of Bosnia into "ethnically pure" states.

DIANA: The ideology of difference reduces individuals to homogeneous categories. Either you are in this group or you are in that group, but you cannot be in both. Bosnians like me (those from mixed marriages or in mixed marriages) are effectively excluded from discussions that are based on simple, ethnocentric classifications.

Regardless of which numbers or percentages are discussed, somehow a minority of Bosnians are omitted from the calculation. You can see this for yourselves. Pick up an American newspaper or magazine article which breaks down the different "ethnic" groups in Bosnia, and you will notice that the numbers never add up to one hundred percent. This is because Bosnians like me, those who cannot be placed in a convenient ethnic category, are not included.

The overwhelming majority of Bosnians from mixed backgrounds voted for Bosnian independence in 1992 and continue to support the current multi-cultural, democratic government of Bosnia-Herzegovina. These Bosnians, who represent over ten percent of Bosnia's population, are rarely heard from or discussed. It is as if we do not exist.

AIDA: I said earlier that in many ways BISER is about supporting women like Diana, women who do not see themselves in simple ethnic terms. At the same time, BISER is about preserving what these women represent: multi-culturalism.

An extension of the idea of supporting multi-cultural women is the goal of preserving a multi-cultural state in which all women and their families can live in peace, without fear of persecution. The Bosnian Muslims, Christians, and Jews of BISER believe that a unified, secular, democratic, multi-cultural Bosnia is the only road toward a permanent peace and the only way of life worth struggling for.

In the end BISER is an effort to preserve women, to preserve a country, to preserve a way of life.

DIANA: Earlier we said that BISER is a feminist human rights organization. This self-characterization developed both in response to the needs of the Bosnian people as well as in reaction to the nature of the aggression against Bosnia.

In other words, what began with protests and rallies in Germany at the start of the aggression quickly grew to include humanitarian efforts to aid the growing number of refugees fleeing the war. And as the ambitions of the Serbian nationalists were uncovered to reveal their ultimate goal of "ethnically cleansing" all non-Serbs out of Bosnia, our purpose expanded to include a campaign against human rights abuses in general and genocide in particular.

Then, when it became clear that women are specific targets of Serbian genocidal warfare, our mission accordingly shifted to reflect the need to educate people about the gender-based nature of the aggression and to advocate specifically on behalf of Bosnian women.

AIDA: Personal accounts of rape and other gender-specific atrocities circulated in the exiled Bosnian community long before the "official reports on rape" were published. I was in Germany when I first heard stories of mass rapes, gang rapes, genital mutilations, forced incest, coerced pregnancies, etc. . . I spoke to a German woman, a human rights activist, after hearing about these atrocities against Bosnian women. She warned me against speaking out too strongly on the issue because we did not have any "real evidence." I was angered by her caution. Do you think these women are lying?

But in the end, I knew that she was right. Without volumes of sworn testimonies, no one would believe these women. So we decided to take a trip to Croatia for the specific purpose of meeting and assisting rape survivors. During three days in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, we met over one hundred women who were willing to talk to us about their brutal experiences.

It was also during this trip that I met a woman named Fatima. Fatima is the mother of ten children and a member of Mothers for Peace, a group that organizes protests and other activities in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, in an attempt to get their sons out of the Serbian army. I wanted to talk with Fatima in private, so we went to an outdoor cafe to talk.

Fatima brought with her a tape-recorded testimony of a sixteen-year-old Bosnian girl named Mirsada. For four months, this girl and her mother were kept in a place that Fatima describes as a brothel-like rape/death camp. Fatima said that Mirsada's testimony is not unusual. (Over the course of the summer, Fatima had recorded dozens of testimonies documenting severe sexual torture and abuse of young females.) I asked to listen to the tape.

The following is what I heard on the tape: during the four-month period of her confinement, Mirsada was repeatedly raped every day. She was gang raped on numerous occasions. According to her own estimations, Mirsada was raped more than one thousand times. She became pregnant from these rapes.

After listening to the testimony, I asked Fatima if there was anything I could do for Mirsada. Fatima told me that the girl was now living in a refugee camp and had few possessions; she did not even own a nightgown. "If you could buy her some clothes," Fatima said, "it would really help her."

So together Fatima and I went to a department store. Fatima told me that Mirsada was very petite, so I looked at small-sized garments. But each time I showed something to Fatima, she would say it was not small enough. Even size thirty-six, the smallest European size, was too big. So we bought everything for Mirsada in the children's department.

Until the very last moment, I thought for sure that Fatima was having some sort of fantasy about this girl being so small. But everything we bought fit perfectly. When I was leaving to go back to Germany, I finally met Mirsada. She came to say thank you and goodbye. I remember looking at her and thinking, my God, she does not look much older than twelve. She was wearing the clothes that we bought her.

DIANA: Whenever I hear Mirsada's story, I am painfully reminded of the skepticism and insensitivity that pervades many of the published reports and news stories on gender-specific atrocities in Bosnia.

This literature is full of language asserting or insinuating some of the following propositions: (i) Since women are raped every day all over the world, we should not intervene to stop rape in Bosnia; (ii) Since women and their bodies are always targets during wartime, we should not view rape in Bosnia as something unusual; (iii) Since all sides are committing rapes in Bosnia, all sides are equally guilty; and (iv) Since it is unthinkable that over sixty five thousand women were raped, Bosnian women must be lying in order to generate sympathy for their governments.

It is tempting to dismiss these cynical statements as the predictable products of male-entrenched organizations. But some of these institutions, including the United Nations, the European Community, and various non-governmental bodies, are among the most influential and powerful in the world. Their interpretations of events in Bosnia, whether accurate or not, have greater weight than thousands of rape survivors' testimonies.

AIDA: Earlier this year I read Amnesty International's report on gender-based atrocities in Bosnia. The report begins with a sentence that states something like the following:

All sides in Bosnia are committing rape, but Muslim women are the chief victims and the chief perpetrators are the Serbian armed forces.

This statement is, at best, an incomplete and callous description of what is occurring in Bosnia. The uninformed reader might very well conclude that in Bosnia all men are indiscriminately raping all women, that Serbian men just happen to rape more than other men, and that Muslim women just happen to suffer more rapes than other women. In other words, according

to Amnesty, there is no material connection between the Serbian perpetrators and the Muslim women who are raped. This simply is not true.

First, even before 1993, it was clear to most observers that the Serbs were conducting genocidal warfare against Bosnia's Muslims and that mass rape and sexual torture were principal instruments of this genocide.

Further, it was also clear that rapes against non-Serbian females, mostly Muslim, were systematically planned, ordered, and executed as part of Serbia's campaign of "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia. (It was widely reported when certain Serbian nationalist soldiers, who were captured and imprisoned by the Bosnian government, testified at their public trials that they were given "orders to rape" by their military superiors.)

Lastly, while there undoubtedly have been rapes committed by non-Serbs in Bosnia, these isolated incidents of rape were neither ordered nor condoned by the Bosnian government.

Thus, a more accurate sentence by Amnesty would have read as follows:

Serbian military and paramilitary forces are systematically raping and committing other gender-based atrocities against non-Serbian women, mostly Muslims, as part of its genocidal campaign to seize Bosnian territory. There are also reports of isolated sexual abuses on all sides.

DIANA: Few issues in the Bosnian war have generated as much unnecessary controversy as the answer to the following question: "How many Bosnian women were raped?"

Each time Aida and I publicly state that according to BISER's documentation sixty-five thousand Bosnian Muslim women were raped during the war, I prepare myself to hear charges of distortion and exaggeration. I cannot imagine how the survivors feel when they face these assaults.

It is true that estimates of the number of Bosnian women raped vary widely. Many different groups are documenting gender-based war crimes in Bosnia and each is using a distinct method of collecting and interpreting data. These distinct methods have yielded estimates from ten thousand to eighty thousand Bosnian women raped.

As part of our work, BISER has gathered and interpreted seven thousand written testimonies of rape and other gender-based crimes. Each testimony not only documents each woman's experiences of sexual torture, but also documents other crimes that she has witnessed. Our documentation reveals that, on average, each woman witnessed about nine other "undocumented" women who were subjected to sexual torture. From this, BISER concluded that approximately sixty five thousand Bosnian women

were raped. Further, there is evidence from hospitals and clinics in Bosnia and Croatia which strongly suggests that about fifty percent of the women who are raped become pregnant as a result.

AIDA: Sometimes I am very impatient with the number enthusiasts. Does it really make a difference whether ten thousand or one hundred thousand women were raped? Does it really matter, especially in Bosnia, where thousands of women were repeatedly raped over weeks and months? Since each act of rape is a separate crime, there were millions of criminal acts of rape committed in Bosnia!

To me the debate over "how many women were raped" symbolizes the male preoccupation with inane details and his indifference to the reality of women's lives. Even if only one woman is raped, she has no need for details. She just wants the brutality stopped! It is no different in Bosnia. Bosnian women want all gender-based atrocities to stop now and they want the perpetrators brought to trial for all their crimes against women.

DIANA: Considering the disbelief surrounding the rape issue, I am amazed that survivors continue to share their horror stories with others. I remember being particularly proud at the first dozen or so Bosnian women who bravely came forward to tell their stories to the world media. I was convinced that these courageous acts would finally force Europe and the United Nations to acknowledge the brutal nature of this aggression and to act meaningfully on behalf of all survivors.

After a series of sensational news stories, which included anonymous statements questioning the veracity of the rape survivors, the women were quickly forgotten. Even the flood of international women's groups that descended on the scene eventually packed up their operations and returned to their home countries.

As for the heroic women, apparently they too had expected miracles to occur. A few weeks after they spoke to the press, many experienced severe trauma. One tried to commit suicide.

AIDA: I am an architect raised in a family of architects, so I have a tendency to view problems in a structural and logical way. When the time came for me to confront the issue of "systematic rape" in Bosnia, I instinctively approached the issue in an almost scientific question and answer format.

The first question I asked: Who are the victims? Well, the victims of systematic rape are exclusively civilian, primarily female, though there is evidence of male sexual torture as well. It is also clear that victims of systematic rape are all non-Serbs, mostly Muslims.

The second question I asked: Where are these victims from? Many media reports spoke of systematic rape as if it were occurring generally throughout the former Yugoslavia. On the contrary, the evidence clearly shows that systematic rape occurs exclusively inside those territories in Bosnia attacked by Serbian nationalists.

This answer lead me to the next question: Who are the perpetrators? The perpetrators of systematic rape are undoubtedly the Serbs, but naturally not all Serbs are perpetrators.

The last question and in many ways the most difficult: Why rape? I asked myself repeatedly: Why rape? And why systematic rape? In some cases, every non-Serbian woman in a village is raped. Most are repeatedly raped, many are raped until their deaths. I just could not understand why.

So I reread testimonies, spoke to more survivors, and even designed a chart. Soon a pattern emerged. I noted that many of the rapes occurred at about the same time, even in villages hundreds of miles apart. I then realized that rapes occurred in similar contexts. In other words, a series of analogous events transpire in most towns and villages where systematic rapes occur.

First, the town or village is overrun militarily by Serbian nationalists and all non-Serbs are rounded up by the local Serbian leaders. Inevitably, the local Serbian leaders have lists with names of all the non-Serbian residents. Influential non-Serbs including intellectuals, politicians, and religious leaders are high on this list of undesirables. These individuals are the first to be executed.

Next, some non-Serbs are indiscriminately tortured or killed, and those males who survive are eventually herded and transported outside their town or village, usually to concentration camps. After gaining full control through terror, the Serbs physically separate the non-Serbian men and women. At about this time, the rapes occur.

Generally, the first rapes are committed in public and the first victims tend to be either the very young or the very old. The Serbs will usually select a seventy-to-eighty-year-old woman or a five-to-seven-year-old girl, and in front of the entire community rape them repeatedly. The very young almost never survive the brutality, dying a few hours after the rapes. Then, some of the younger women are raped — often gang raped — usually in front of their husbands, their children, or their parents. In some cases, fathers are forced to have intercourse with their daughters, and sons with their mothers.

Many of the younger women, those between the ages of seventeen and twenty, are gathered and moved to buildings in or around the town, usually converted schools or factories, where the Serbs have set up brothel-like facilities. Once there, the women will be subjected to repeated rapes, including gang rapes, for weeks and months. Many will endure unimagin-

able sexual torture. Others will be killed after weeks of continuous rapes. Some women will simply disappear. Those who survive and become pregnant are detained until an abortion becomes impossible.

DIANA: It soon became clear to many of us that rape in the context of the Bosnian war does not correspond to prevailing conceptualizations of rape. That is, rape in Bosnia is not "rape" in the most commonly understood ways. For example, there are those who perceive rape as isolated episodes of social deviance. To them rape is a rare crime associated with promiscuous conduct or inferior upbringing. To others rape happens to most, if not all, women as part of a larger patriarchal scheme. Still others, like me, see rape as an unpredictable event, one capable of striking any female at some point in her life.

In Bosnia, however, none of these conceptions of rape is appropriate. In Bosnia rape is hardly uncommon or isolated: thousands of women are raped repeatedly and concurrently. In Bosnia rape is not uniformly inflicted upon all women, but on women who also happen to be non-Serbs. In other words, women are raped not just because of their gender — being women — but also because of their cultural identity — being non-Serbs. In Bosnia rape is hardly unpredictable: it is premeditated, mandated, and systematic. Bosnian women are not raped indiscriminately here and there. Instead, predictable factors control which women are systematically raped and which are not. Specifically, the women who are systematically raped are Bosnian women of non-Serbian origin, mostly Muslim, who happen to live on Bosnian territory that the Serbian nationalist aggressor covets.

In the context of Bosnia, then, rape is public rape, it is 24-hour rape, it is gang rape, it is torture and sexual mutilation, it is forced incest and compelled impregnation. These are not rapes to terrorize one woman or many women; these are rapes to destroy a people. These are rapes, many women told us, which make you want to leave your home and never come back. In the war against Bosnia, rape has become a tool of genocide.

AIDA: I want to make this clearer. The declared goal of the Serbian nationalists is to unite all Serbs — and only Serbs — in a "Greater Serbia." That some Serbs happen to live outside of Serbia (primarily in Bosnia and Croatia) is to be remedied by first conquering and then "ethnically cleansing" all non-Serbs out of these territories. To ensure that those who survive "ethnic cleansing" never come back to claim these territories, the Serbs torture the local non-Serbian population in such inhumane ways that returning to their towns and villages becomes unthinkable. In this scheme rape is a primary form of torture. Rape, as planned and executed by Serbian nationalists, terrorizes not just one woman or only women, but an entire people.

Why rape? Rape is an inexpensive and effective tool of terror. You do not need oil, weapons, ammunition, or skilled soldiers to commit rape.

In summary, then, the Serbian nationalists need land to create "Greater Serbia," aggression is the mode of conquering land, genocide is the primary instrument of this aggression, and rape is a tool of this genocide. Thus, rape leads to conquered land.

It is now obvious why rape!

DIANA: I always have mixed feelings when I am asked to talk about the historical dimensions of the war against Bosnia. Like so many things in this conflict, history has been used and manipulated to justify the Serbian nationalists' brutality.

An obvious case of this is when Serbian nationalists reach back into history to advance their perverted theory that what is going on in Bosnia stems from some kind of "ancient ethnic hatred." Similarly, in explaining their aggression toward non-Serbs, Serbian nationalists exaggerate to the point of fiction their historical grievances against these various peoples.

Although I cannot say that there has been no inter-ethnic strife in Bosnia, to call it "ancient ethnic hatreds" is to mythologize a rather common form of conflict. "Let me tell you about the suffering of Serbs throughout history," says the Serbian nationalist, "and you will understand." Understand what? Genocide? I imagine that no one is safe in a world in which history justifies genocide.

AIDA: For me a painful example of this twisting of history occurs when Serbian nationalists essentially rewrite the text of World War II to include a Serbian genocide at the hands of the Bosnian Muslims.

It is true that Serbs, like many Europeans, suffered great losses during World War II. But those losses resulted primarily from the genocidal policies of the Nazis and their puppet government in Croatia. Serbs were persecuted by Nazis and Croatian fascists (known as "Ustashe"), not by Bosnian Muslims.

This flagrant distortion of history would be terribly ironic if it were not so tragic. The irony and tragedy stem from the same historical fact: while many Serbs were suffering the horrors of Nazism, Serbian nationalists (better known as "Chetniks") were at the time "purging" Yugoslavia of its Muslims, slaughtering or expelling more than twenty percent of the Muslim population in a manner not unlike today.

Serbian genocides against Muslims in the Balkans, not just Bosnia's Muslims, is the most neglected historical event in Balkan history. Even today, when "Balkan experts" discuss historical aspects of the Bosnian war, they uniformly ignore the long history of Serbian genocidal warfare against all Muslims of the former Yugoslavia.

DIANA: In the end, however, we must ask the only relevant question in this debate: Are Serbian nationalists justified in slaughtering any non-Serbian group today for abuses, real or invented, committed against Serbs fifty or one hundred or five hundred years ago? Since Croatian fascists murdered Serbs during World War II, are Serbian nationalists now excused for killing Croats? Serbian nationalists say yes, for they openly declare that their policy of "ethnic cleansing" serves to punish for past suffering, real or invented, as well as to deter future abuses, real or invented.

Further, by refraining from taking any real action against Serbian "ethnic cleansing," the West apparently condones these sentiments. As a consequence, Western leaders seem to advance the Serbian nationalists' frightening proposition that genocide is legitimate when it is carried out as a form of retribution or deterrence.

AIDA: I am often amazed to discover the extent to which the West and its media have, willingly and without challenge, adopted the Serbian nationalists' versions of history. This uncritical acceptance of the "past suffering of the Serbs" may suggest more than just plain ignorance of Balkan history. It may also reflect the West's overt bias against Muslims.

More than once, prominent European politicians have publicly stated that if this had been a case of Bosnian Muslims "ethnically cleansing" Christians, the war would not have lasted one week.

Consider, also, the expression "Bosnia's Muslim-led government," which is consistently used in the West to describe our elected and democratic leadership. It is true that Bosnia's elected President, Alija Izetbegovic, is a Muslim, but the President of the Bosnian Parliament is a Christian Orthodox, while the Bosnian Parliament consists of individuals from Muslim, Catholic, Christian Orthodox, Jewish, and other backgrounds.

Describing our government as "Bosnia's Muslim-led government" is absurd to us, and is equivalent to describing President Clinton's administration as "America's Baptist-led government."

DIANA: We cannot underestimate the degree to which Western governments, who sit in the powerful position of deciding Bosnia's fate, are affected by false images of Bosnian Muslims. To those of us who know Bosnia and its people, it is inconceivable to associate the Bosnian Muslims — the world's most secular Muslims — with any type of religious zealotry.

Frankly, I think that the "specter of fundamentalism" (i.e., the political aspirations of a religious orthodoxy movement), a vision which Serbian nationalists and their apologists in the West insincerely but regularly submit in the case of Bosnia, is a greater threat in America than in Bosnia.

AIDA: It would seem, however, that misleading depictions have served the Serbs very well. Western governments, reluctant to intervene but clearly unable to ignore the butchering of innocents, have eagerly embraced the Serb-spun versions of history as well as their mischaracterizations of Bosnian Muslims.

For Western leaders "ancient ethnic hatreds" and the "threat of Islamic fundamentalism" are acceptable explanations for the unimaginable horrors inflicted on non-Serbs as well as a legitimate excuse for appeasement.

Further, by overemphasizing the historical and religious dimensions of the war in Bosnia, the aggressors avert attention away from the actual and very current causes of the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia: the rise of neofascism in Serbia in the wake of communism's collapse.

DIANA: I do not believe that one has to know history to respond meaningfully to the genocide against the Bosnian people. Historical context should neither prevent us from acting nor encourage us to act. We should act because genocide is evil and must be stopped.

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AIDA DAIDZIC and DIANA KAPIDZIC: BISER is an international program of assistance and advocacy for Bosnian women. In providing assistance BISER's program addresses both the immediate goal of survival and the ultimate goal of self-sufficiency. For example, we collect and distribute a wide variety of humanitarian assistance, such as food, clothing, basic medicines, hygiene products, and baby products to women refugees and their families. We also furnish medical and psychotherapeutic assistance for survivors of torture and contribute additional aid to pre-existing medical resources. At the same time, we also provide self-help training for Bosnian women so that they can help themselves and their families, as well as other refugees. Our dual program of assistance and advocacy hopes to address the unique needs of women refugees. In short, BISER is an attempt to lend a voice, as well as a hand, to Bosnian women.

Another dimension of BISER's program is advocacy. Since BISER was founded, our members have consistently and actively campaigned on behalf of Bosnian women throughout Europe and now in the United States. We have held countless lectures, protests, vigils, and teach-ins, all for the purpose of educating citizens of Western democracies and urging them to petition their governments to stop the genocide in Bosnia. We have attended numerous United Nations-sponsored conferences and have persistently pressured the United Nations to acknowledge that Serbian nationalists are engaging in a deliberate and systematic campaign of sexual

torture as a means of conquering territory in Bosnia. BISER has also participated in human rights conferences sponsored by various non-governmental organizations, providing at each forum a voice for Bosnian women.

With the help of our lawyer, Professor Catharine A. MacKinnon, BISER has filed a lawsuit on behalf of Bosnian women who survived rape and other gender-based genocidal crimes against Radovan Karadzic, leader of the Serbian nationalists in Bosnia and named war criminal, in the United States. In addition, BISER has unequivocally demanded that the United Nations create an international war crimes tribunal to prosecute the orchestrators and perpetrators of genocide in Bosnia. We have advocated that this court aggressively prosecute gender-based genocidal crimes in Bosnia, including sexual torture and forced pregnancies, as crimes against humanity. Finally, we have insisted that this tribunal be provided with the authority and resources it will need to ensure accountability and serve justice to the countless victims of Serbian "ethnic cleansing."

As part of the goal of self-sufficiency, BISER has developed a detailed plan for rebuilding women's lives when they return to Bosnia. At the heart of this plan is the construction of temporary but secure shelters in destroyed Bosnian towns and villages. These dwellings will be built around the needs of Bosnian women and their families. Since Bosnian women have exceptionally close ties to their immediate and extended families, especially female members like sisters, grandmothers, aunts, and cousins, we have designed the shelters to support multi-generational families with large communal areas where members can gather. The maintenance of the multi-generational family unit is integral to the survival, the healing, and the growth of Bosnian life.

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