

"Woman As Mother in a *The Woman War Refugee*

BY MARGARET D. STETZ

Cet article examine la couverture par les médias les plus populaires de l'Amérique du Nord de la crise du Kosovo au printemps 1999, qui ont réduit les réfugiées à l'image monolithique des "Femmes comme mères au foulard". L'auteure remarque que cette étiquette démontre un esprit conservateur qui décourage la reconnaissance des besoins et des diverses identités des femmes, même en temps de guerre.

The needs of women war refugees are enormous, multi-faceted, and very challenging to meet. Such a statement may sound obvious, but evidently it has not been obvious to the print or television journalists in North America who have covered the Kosovar refugee crisis. Throughout Spring 1999, major media outlets, especially those based in the United States, appear to have had a stake in constructing a one-dimensional image of women in war—a picture that has dominated our sources of information and shaped our thinking about who the Kosovar women are and what humanitarian aid they require both immediately and in the future. The circulation of this highly restricted representation of the female refugee, however, says far more about the current nostalgia in North America for conservative gender roles than it says about the actual situation of ethnic Albanian women driven from their homeland. We might call this media creation "Woman as Mother in a Headscarf." Its popularity, and the rapidity of its circulation, suggest how appealing it has been on several levels to mainstream media corporations and their audiences alike. Not until we get beyond this fantasy figure, though, can we

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begin to acknowledge how varied and overwhelming are the requirements of the women who have been displaced by war, as well as how much they mirror the requirements of western women in general, many of which are still unmet. Not until then, too, will we recognize that notions of how possible it is for women to escape "conflict zones" change, when we consider the conflict zones of gender.

"Woman as Mother in a Headscarf" proves to have been a useful construction, both for journalists and for the consumers of their intellectual wares, for several reasons. Perhaps its greatest value has been to anti-feminists, for it reaffirms essentialist notions of women as simple creatures, whose "natural" roles come down to a single biological function, and who are chiefly in want of (masculine) protection. Certainly, it is no accident that the primary circulator of this representation in North America has been *Time*

magazine. Less than one year before the war in Yugoslavia, *Time* used the cover of its 29 June 1998 issue to pose the question, "Is Feminism Dead?" The feature story that accompanied this notorious cover—with its image of the decapitated heads of Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan, and Gloria Steinem, alongside the face of the fictional television character "Ally McBeal"—had assured readers that the movement for women's rights was indeed a thing of the past. Ginia Bellafante's "Feminism: It's All About Me!" painted a dark picture of "the flightiness of contemporary feminism" (57) with far-too-liberated young women in the United States, who already enjoy full political and economic advantages, greedily turning to feminism as a vehicle for pushing their own selfish and excessive demands for more privileges.

In contrast to this nightmarish vision of young, unmarried, childless female hedonists dominating the North American cultural landscape, *Time* produced a series of sentimentalized images of Kosovar refugee women the following Spring. The most widely seen and discussed of these occupied the cover of the April 12, 1999 issue: a half-length photograph of a woman carrying an infant in her arms, with the headscarf encircling her face creating a visual echo of the swaddling cloth around the child. Indeed, the photograph was cropped to emphasize the inseparability of this pairing, for it cut off the woman's body at the waist, just at the point where the child's body ended, as though to render superfluous any part of the woman unconnected to support of the child.

Headscarf" *and the North American Media*

At the same time that the magazine's cover filled newsstands, supermarkets, and college bookstores with mass reproductions of that image, Time-Warner employed the resources of the internet to distribute additional and longer-lived variations upon it. One month later, in May 1999, it was possible to download from the *Time* website a photo-essay titled "Faces of Flight," featuring related versions of the same visual text. Most striking was one double head-shot, attributed to Anja Niedringhaus, of an openmouthed, crying child leaning upon the shoulder of a woman—her face impassive, her lips set in silence, and her headscarf draped like a Renaissance madonna's veil. The caption to this photograph read,

A refugee mother and child take shelter against the rain in a small camp outside Kukes, Albania, on Tuesday. The refugee family arrived on Sunday after fleeing the town of Kosovo Polje... ("Faces of Flight")

Here the emphasis lay upon simultaneously subsuming an individual woman into the social role of "mother"—erasing her name, age, personal history, and all other categories of identification that would have belonged to her as a speaking subject—and presenting this mute figure as in want of "shelter" from nature's elements, but articulating no more complex needs or desires. As the image seemed to tell its internet viewers, in times of war and violence, women return to the "basics" and revert to their essential selves. They nobly devote themselves to perform-

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ing their maternal functions, even though they become helpless and without resource when they are no longer in the domestic settings where they belong and when separated from their husbands.

Certainly, political backlash against feminism has helped to fuel the reduction of female Kosovar refugees to the unitary "Woman as Mother in a Headscarf." But that has not been the sole impetus behind the dissemination of this image. Charities and relief agencies, too, have used it as an aid in soliciting contributions. And why not? After all, it creates a sentimental notion that tugs at the heartstrings of potential donors—a notion summed up in the endlessly repeated phrase "refugee women and children," the words linked to signal innocence and vulnerability. Assigning adult women, some of whom may have been involved in resistance activities in support of the Kosovar Liberation Army before their flight, the same status as

children makes them uncomplicated props in fundraising campaigns. Depictions, moreover, of women in headscarves carrying swaddled babies have a special appeal to white North American donors of European or Eastern European ancestry. They serve, at the unconscious level of nostalgia, to recall turn-of-the-century photographs of the viewers' own immigrant grandmothers or great-grandmothers, and thus to open the givers' wallets.

It is clear that the strategists who have designed the relief agencies' Kosovar appeals are conscious of the history of recent aid—or rather, of the absence of such aid—in similar circumstances elsewhere in the world. Majority white populations in the global North have, in general, ignored the desperate circumstances of women in countries with majority Black or Asian populations, such as Rwanda and Indonesia, where politically motivated campaigns of genocide and rape have also occurred. Thus, in "putting a face" on suffering, it has been the goal of North American charities to distinguish the "face" of Kosovar as not only that of an iconic maternal figure, but of an unmistakably white one, as well. Organizations in the United States, moreover, have been careful to dissociate the image of women's "headscarf" from its Islamic associations as a version of *hijab* and to suppress any mention of the Muslim community in Kosovo, to which many women belong. Over the past decade, the American media, in particular, has labored to instill in its viewing public the notion that "Muslim" equals "terrorist" and that all adherents of Islam are dangerous fa-

natics. Thus, the charitable fundraising campaigns for Kosovo have avoided any mention of religion, as part of their efforts to construct a representation of women that emphasizes innocence, vulnerability, and the need for (paternalistic) help and protection.

Indeed, relief organizations in the United States that offer a different image of women in their publicity have found themselves less successful in raising funds. The STAR (Strategists, Trainers, Advocates and Resources) Network of World Learning, for instance, which is based in Washington, DC, used the first month of the Spring 1999 crisis to publicize the existence of strong Kosovar women's organizations and the presence, in the refugee camps, of women leaders who had already been addressing the diverse needs of the female populations, including education, health, and reproductive concerns. The Network's own "Kosovo Women's Fund," which emphasizes the importance of supporting activities initiated and run by the Kosovar women themselves, managed to raise a mere \$30,000 that month, even as relief agencies that showed women as powerless victims attracted far greater sums (Stegall). Fewer Americans, it seemed, were ready to give generously on behalf of active, knowledgeable, and capable refugee women, who were creating and running their own services for their peers.

Public resistance to the notion of Kosovar women as competent and resourceful and public embrace of an image that presents them, instead, as helpless and unsophisticated has gone hand-in-hand with another impulse driving the spread of "Woman as Mother in a Headscarf." Americans, in particular, like to have their national sense of superiority confirmed and to patronize those to whom they offer assistance. Even among feminists in the United States, the impulse toward self-congratulation has been strong, and the belief that women elsewhere in the world have "quaint" and "backward" lives pre-

dominates. Constructing all Kosovar refugee women as headscarf-wearing mothers has allowed them to be used as one further piece of evidence demonstrating how much more desirable it is to be a woman in North America. At the same time, the mass reproduction of the spectacle of this "primitive" figure has encouraged North

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Americans to identify "conflict zones" as places where women dress differently and behave differently—thus, not to see their own societies as conflict zones, as well, where homelessness, violence, and oppression are nearly as commonplace as in areas of ethnic warfare.

I am not arguing that popular North American media depictions of Kosovar refugee women have no connection to reality, but rather that they have excluded many other possible and equally valid representations. And I would assert, moreover, that such unconscious censoring of the alternatives has done harm. This monolithic construction of female suffering not only has stripped Kosovar women of their individuality and their variety—of a range of differences that we would insist upon, if we were talking about ourselves or our own identities; it has also permitted women refugees to be short-changed of many kinds of support that they require and deserve.

Conveniently for potential donors in the U.S. and Canada, the needs of the "Woman as Mother in a Headscarf" are few and relatively easy to meet. She is, we might say, cheap to keep. After all, she is a selfless caretaker, who asks nothing for herself and whose concern is wholly for her children and for her husband, who—if he is not missing or dead—is broken in spirit by his inability to protect and support his dependents. The Kosovar "Mother in a Headscarf" is always assumed to be heterosexual and to have been part of a nuclear family with a male head of household, although we would make no such assumptions about all North American women, even those with children. Staring into the camera uncomprehendingly, with the same dazed look of the child she is photographed holding, the Kosovar woman appears to require only what a child would—food, shelter, and basic medical care. In fact, her wants are less than those of children, as she would hardly expect to receive schooling, as well.

The one-dimensionality of this representation becomes clear when placed alongside images of the refugee crisis as covered by European journalists. In April 1999, viewers in Washington, DC of a local public TV station (WVNC Channel 56 in Fairfax, VA) that broadcasts news programs from foreign outlets could have watched "Kosovo: A Human Tragedy," a German production from DW television by Hermann Engelbrecht. There, the refugee situation was allowed to have a different face—the face of a 20-year-old woman, who had reached Macedonia. She wore make-up and earrings, not a headscarf, and dressed like any university student on a North American campus. In fact, she had been a student, and her primary concern, she said before the camera, was to resume her education. Confined to a limbo of boredom and uncertainty, she missed, she said, having fun. She had enjoyed going out to clubs with her

friends. Most of all, she missed those friends. The producers of the DW report showed a photograph of the group to which she had belonged: five young women smiling and clinging to one another's arms. Now, she had no knowledge of the fates of those friends—where they were, whether they had made it out of Pristina, whether they were alive. As she began to name and talk about them, she sobbed uncontrollably.

Would it surprise North American audiences to know that women war refugees define themselves through networks of friendships and workplace relationships, just as we ourselves do, and that the destruction of those networks is as shattering to Kosovar women as it would be to us? Humanitarian aid for women does not mean providing a boxed meal and a plastic tent and calling it a day. It means helping women to restore and repair a vast range of broken connections in their lives. It means finding opportunities for them to resume their education and their occupations, whether as farmworkers, shopkeepers, office workers, or academics. It means allowing them a purpose beyond mere survival, recognizing that they have a function beyond tending to others, and affirming that their right to a sense of competence, dignity, and control over their futures is as great as it is for men. It means acknowledging them as people with talents and ambitions to be exercised—not ignored, erased, or subordinated.

A comprehensive and serious humanitarian relief effort for the Kosovar women, both before and after resettlement, is a tremendously expensive enterprise. But it ought to be expensive, for it must take into account both extraordinary and ordinary needs. The extraordinary needs include medical services and psychological counseling for those who have undergone or witnessed war atrocities, who have experienced violence themselves or seen neighbors, friends, and family members wounded or murdered. The extraor-

dinary needs also include services for those who have been raped. In Spring 1999, much was made in the North American press about human rights workers interviewing women to document these rapes, with a view to later prosecution of the Serbian perpetrators under international statutes that now treat rape as a war

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crime. Little was said, however, about the opportunities for psychological support available to these survivors of sexual assault. In the U.S. and Canada, we assume that rape is a trauma that affects not only the victim, but those around her, and that disrupts all pre-existing relationships—with sexual partners, families, and communities. Through rape crisis centers, therefore, we also provide counseling and assistance to the partners, families, and friends of those who have been raped. Have adequate numbers of rape crisis centers been set up in the refugee camps? Here the media has been silent. But Kosovar women who have endured the horror of sexual assault deserve what we would recognize as necessary for ourselves, under other conditions.

Women also require assistance of other sorts. Domestic violence, for instance, does not disappear in times of war, nor does it cease because "home" is now a car, a plastic tent, or a converted factory. The disruptions

of the refugee experience increase the likelihood that men who feel powerless and frustrated will batter women. Assistance to those who are being abused by their partners—and who now truly have nowhere else to go—is more crucial than ever. So, too, is counseling for women who may be tempted to batter. The saintly "Woman as Mother in a Headscarf," created by the North American media, never lashes out in rage and despair to beat her children or her aged parents, but actual survivors of war often do. Real women, too, suffer from depression and contemplate or attempt suicide.

Such women encounter, moreover, the same daily problems of gender injustice that they would face anywhere else—problems, in fact, that are magnified by the conditions of refugee existence. Camps such as those that have been erected to house the stateless Kosovars are breeding grounds for sexual harassment by police and bureaucratic officials, wielding unchecked authority over the refugees and demanding "payment" in return for "favours." In its 1995 *Global Report on Women's Human Rights*, the Women's Project of Human Rights Watch has documented the frequency with which female refugees are also raped, even after supposedly having escaped from conflict zones to safety:

In host countries, local residents and even police, military and immigration officials, often view refugee women as targets for assault.... Fellow refugees may also target displaced and refugee women for sexual abuse. (Human Rights Watch 102)

Are channels being established for reporting and curbing such abuses? Where is the assistance for women who experience them? North American mainstream media has been silent on such matters, while presenting its image of Kosovar women. Our notion of assistance to refugees must be broad enough to address

such questions, but we must first admit to their ubiquity for all women everywhere.

If we offer Kosovar women merely a package of food and a tent, we will have done far too little for this to deserve the noble title of "humanitarian aid." For it to be "humanitarian," it should come with the promise of just treatment and with full appreciation of the dignity and individuality of those receiving the aid. Such aid is very expensive, for it requires both immediate investigation of the shifting needs of the refugees, as they themselves identify them, and a longterm commitment. It also requires recognition of the fact that the "safe zones" to which they have been brought—whether those are in Macedonia or in New York—are still rife with the problems of sexism and gendered violence.

The sentimentalized "Woman as Mother in a Headscarf," like a stray dog in an ASPCA poster, needs only

scraps from your table and a corner on your floor. But real refugee women, as Virginia Woolf might have said, ask for a room of their own, just as you would.

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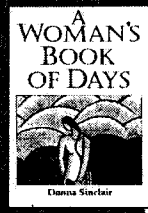
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