



## **Commemoration of Wars through the Prism of Patriarchy**

My engagement focuses on the activities of veterans, former fighters from different armies who participated in the conflicts of the 1990s and who now work together to overcome war trauma, break stereotypes, and promote non-violence and dialogue. Their efforts are centered around reconciliation, confronting the past, and building peace, and I am a direct participant in this work. This is a well-developed network of veterans visiting places of suffering, holding silent commemorations, and connecting with people in local communities, political parties, the media, and government authorities. In addition to veterans, who are now peace activists, the network includes former camp inmates, civilian war victims, and journalists, all with the ongoing support from the Center for Nonviolent Action in Sarajevo. Many participants have faced challenging situations, especially women, as they have not always been accepted in their own cultural, national, or religious communities.

After the Yugoslav wars, public and political narratives in post-conflict societies often ascribed collective guilt to entire nations involved in the hostilities. These narratives left little space for critical reflection on individual or group accountability, including the roles and experiences of women. Empathy for others, acknowledgment of wrongdoing by one's group, and a deeper understanding of the legitimate fears people experienced during the war were largely ignored. This pattern of selective memory and moral simplification mirrored the dominant narratives of the Second World War that shaped the region's

collective consciousness, structured around rigid binaries: aggressor vs. defender, fascist vs. anti-fascist, just vs. unjust. These were uncritically repeated in interpretations of the more recent conflicts. Many combatants did not join the war out of personal conviction but were persuaded that their actions were necessary to defend their nation, territory, homes, and families. In the post-war period, a large number of these individuals have come to recognize the importance of pursuing alternative, non-violent mechanisms for resolving political conflicts. Crucially, this includes embracing personal responsibility and fostering a shared commitment to preventing the recurrence of war.

My involvement in these activities began with confronting the past. You think you can carry certain things deep in your soul, but then you find yourself in a situation where you're forced to face them, and you experience a kind of catharsis. Then you realize that you have to talk about it. It needs to be discussed. Women should not remain silent. Women in the military had different roles, but now feminists say, "You don't have to be in the military." Unfortunately, armies still exist. So what do we do now? If they are to be abolished, then let the great powers be the ones to abolish them. But for equality to be achieved, we must be part of them. Activism is difficult without access to institutions. But when you have like-minded people within an institution, everything changes. It's much better because women who, for example, wore the uniform didn't do so because they wanted to fight in a war. The question always follows: "If you're such peacemaker, why did you participate in the war in the first place?" The key lies in understanding the process that everyone has gone through over the past 20 or 30 years. I joined the army because I wanted to. Why shouldn't both men and women have that choice? It was a challenge, I liked it, I was capable, and I had the right to choose. That's the point: everyone should be able to do what they love. The war took us all by surprise, except, of course, those who prepared it. That in itself caused trauma. Sometimes you don't even realize it's there. But it stays deep inside you, and you keep coming to it. Of course, it doesn't hurt anymore; the wound has

healed. But the scar remains. And whenever something reminds you of it, you should talk about it. The first time is the hardest, when someone provokes you, and you finally break through that barrier. But after that, it becomes like therapy, and it's no longer difficult to talk about it, whether it's the 65th time or the 165th.

Women on all sides experienced the war in similar ways. Yet even today, at commemorations, women are barely visible. The Center for Nonviolent Action created a network of veterans from different militaries, and that diversity has enriched the quality of our work. The stories of people who were once enemies, now friends and true peacebuilders, are the best examples for politicians of how problems can be overcome. But now there are only two of us in this network: me, a former officer of the Yugoslav People's Army [JNA], and a woman who joined the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina [ARBiH] with her husband. It is documented in the publication *We Come in Peace* (2025). I say, "That's good. How was it in the beginning? There was no one. Now there are two. Let's aim for more."

We keep forgetting that half the world is made up of women. And is patriarchy just an evolutionary mistake? People who weren't directly involved don't truly know what happened. That's why we must speak. Let's speak. The differences between women and men lie in empathy, in how we think, and that deserves discussion. Women are often invisible at commemorations, present mainly as mothers, the "keepers of memory". Male figures dominate, male speeches, and memory is militarized, while gender-specific traumas are ignored. It isn't the same to sympathize with a woman who has been raped or when a woman who has been raped speaks to you. That's why we must continuously change the standards. We need practices of remembrance that include women's contributions to the politics of war and peace, without erasing their individual identities or political engagements. That's how we create a standard worthy of the message: peace is priceless. And that message must be passed on to future generations. And what I believe is ultimately most important: no crime can be committed in my name, or

anyone else's. Not in the name of a people, not in the name of a nation. Every crime is simply a crime. And every mother grieves her loved ones. Crime has no religion, no nation, no gender. Our goal is to continuously highlight the importance of a culture of dialogue and tolerance, and to transcend national and religious boundaries. Reconciliation and cooperation among people, even those who once fought each other, are not only possible, but essential conditions for a lasting peace. In this process, veterans become messengers of reconciliation and symbols of hope that societies affected by war can rebuild better relationships. However, women must play an important role in that process.