In the former Yugoslavia, political transition exploded into ethnic conflicts and widespread ethnic violence that heavily affected women. Gendered nationalism silenced and de-politicised women, but women’s groups mobilised and resisted war and nationalism. Women’s groups cooperated across ethnic and national lines in an attempt to prevent conflicts and promote peace. Nowadays, there is a tendency to forget about these efforts. Wars, peace-building, reconciliation and social renovation are gendered processes. If we want a just and democratic society and a sustainable peace, women’s memory needs to be reconstructed and included in the collective memory.

The Center for Women War Victims (CWWV) was founded in 1992, in the midst of a bloody war raging in Bosnia and a frail peace imposed by international forces in Croatia. Its mission was to help and support women refugees ‘regardless of their ethnic backgrounds and other differences’, as was stated in our founding document, ‘The Letter of Intentions’ and to advance and empower women in general by enhancing women’s human rights. Throughout its existence, CWWV worked with thousands of refugee and displaced women by organising self-help groups in refugee camps, distributing humanitarian aid, organising psychological and legal counselling and other forms of what we referred to as feminist social work. At the same time, the activists from the Center fought numerous social and political battles opposing warmongering, hate speech, nationalism and – in particular – denouncing the militarised war violence against women and the further misuse of women victims of sexual war abuses for the purposes of Tudjman’s nationalistic regime. During the war, besides being victims of sexual
war crimes, women in Croatia and the other newly established nation states of former Yugoslavia were exposed to increased domestic violence, economic, social and political discrimination and were increasingly marginalised.

The Center initiated, co-organised or participated at some of the first regional women’s meetings and peace conferences: in 1993, in Zagreb and in Geneva, and in 1995, in Istria. We also helped launch the first all-Bosnian women’s conference in Sarajevo, in 1996. The women from the Center regularly participated at the Women in Black meetings in Novi Sad and other regional meetings, as well as at the most important world meetings on women: the UN conference on human rights in Vienna, 1993 and the Beijing conference, in 1995. The Center was a resource and a supporter of international initiatives for the establishment of the Hague Tribunal, and the recognition of wartime rapes as war crimes. CWWV participated in local and national actions: from organising the petition for keeping abortion in Croatia safe and legal in 1995 (which was successful), to the election campaigns from 1995 to 2000, as well as in writing the shadow report for the UN CEDAW committee in 1998 on the status of women in Croatia. The Center is one of the initiators and the founding member of the Women’s Network of Croatia that today includes some 50 women’s groups from the whole of Croatia and became one of the strongest initiatives in developing Croatian civil society.

During that time, the Center and its members were targets of sometimes severe and threatening public attacks, and denigrating and political confrontations: from the famous case of the ‘Witches from Rio’ to attacks in the Croatian parliament and media.

It is a well-recognised fact that women’s groups have been since the late 1970s the first initiatives, in the reconstruction of civil society in the former Yugoslavia that was blurred within the state-established and state-controlled mass organisations, including women’s organisations in which everybody was enlisted, but none really participated. Women’s feminist initiatives from the late 1970s and women’s groups and projects from the early 1980s were among the rare collective of social actors who pronounced their independence from the state-controlled public sphere. During the war, it was mostly the women’s groups that had developed from these earlier initiatives that built organisations and networks that cut across national and ethnic lines; women led peace and trust-building initiatives.

Nevertheless, women’s efforts in resisting war and nationalism are today largely marginalised and forgotten. Women’s human rights are