

Healing invisible wounds – have we done enough to help the victims of wartime rape?

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The Balkan wars had dramatic consequences for all the republics of the former Yugoslavia, and more specifically Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH), where the most hostile action and violent fighting took place. Over 20,000 girls, women and men were raped (1).

Raped females were often separated from the children they gave birth to, because many were detained for a long time after multiple rape (2). The rape resulted in physical injuries, psychological turmoil, and significant impairment in general functioning. Faced with difficulties in accessing appropriate health care, social stigma and the slow pace of justice, women victims were not offered adequate and effective psychological assistance, or legal, economic and social protection. When the victims of rape, both male and female, talk about what happened, they often feel rejection and condemnation in-

stead of support. The same victims often feel guilty and choose to remain silent and carry their own pain. There are only a few who deal with or who are even slightly interested in how the victims of rape live today (1, 2).

In the research we undertook to assess the prevalence and gender characteristics of the psychological health problems of individuals raped during the BH war, sixteen years after the war ended, we assessed 95 (81 females) Bosniac (Muslim) war survivors who experienced rape as a tool of genocide. In terms of the DSM-IV criteria, raped women were significantly more often anxious than men, and raped men consumed alcohol significantly more often than women, without significant gender differences between them in the prevalence of PTSD, depression, somatic symptoms, anxiety and insomnia, social dysfunction, severe depression and smoking cigarettes (3).

Today's public dialogue is aimed at drawing attention to women who are marginalized in order to help them. They are there but others do not see them. Sweeping these problems under the carpet results in far greater trauma, both for these people and society (1, 2). One important aspect of the Islamic tradition for Bosniac woman, in both their spiritual and everyday life in the family, in the relationship with their fathers, mothers, husbands, children and the

broader family, is shame. Shame, which is highly important, is considered to be “half the faith” in the Islamic tradition. If somebody wants to destroy an individual, it is necessary to do something violently to them against that person’s will.

In his book “Healing invisible wounds: paths to hope and recovery in a violent world” Richard Mollica (4) emphasized that in most societies, institutional religious structures have difficulty helping women who have been sexually violated, both because of the theological limits on women’s role in the religion and because of conservative teachings on sexuality and sexual purity. But he quoted the example of the Dervish, Ahmed Nurudin Mešić (5), a highly regarded 90-year old cleric who was a judge under Sharia law – the Islamic law based on the Qur’an and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. In March 1993 he issued a decree that Bosnian Muslim women who had been sexually abused should be given the status of martyrs. In his fatwa he declared that, as a human being and as a scholar, he needed to implement the truth and restore those women to their rightful place within society: “Is there anyone who can say that these women are guilty and sinful because of what they have been through? Thus they may be guilty for some other reason but for this – no way. Therefore, no one should talk about them like that. We as Muslims, and especially those closest to them, should accept them as heroines, as martyrs, and support them both morally and materially. We recommend especially to men, the husbands of the women who experienced this tragedy, to be sufficiently strong and to embrace their wives, in both a literal and figurative sense. Thus they will show that they really sympathize with their wives’ pain and are willing to make it easier for them to endure (5).” The healing of Bosnian women thus found expression through a wise old cleric. This is

not always the case however. Ordinarily the traumatized person is challenged to establish a more direct line to God without the help of religious institutions or clergy (4).

This should be talked about constantly because this is a crime, not the woman’s attitude, a woman is not guilty of being raped. It is a very complex trauma, very few women have come to our clinic looking for help; most of them have left the country and most have remained silent. It is certain that the public health system of Bosnia-Herzegovina never expected, before the war, to have to deal with such a large number of consequences of the war, on such a vast scale. The increasing shortage of resources and the lack of a multi-sectorial integrative approach, as well as the lack of cultural and gender sensitivity, all contribute to the “conspiracy of silence” even 20 years later, and need to be discussed.

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