

Response to whether the definition of the term “children born of war” and vulnerabilities of children from recent conflict and post-conflict settings should be broadened

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Dear Editor,

I am writing in response to the Letter to the editor submitted by Amra Delić et al. to *Acta Medica Academica* (1). The letter proposes that the current definition of “children born of war” be broadened to include children from “various homogenous and heterogeneous non-integrated post-conflict communities” on the basis of the authors’ hypothesis that other groups of children from recent conflict and post-conflict settings are comparable with respect to certain “core psychosocial issues”. Based on my own ongoing work in the area of mothering children born of war rape in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I have good reasons to assume that there is truth to this hypothesis. Therefore, I would like to suggest that broadening the

definition would be advantageous from a theoretical as well as a strategic perspective. I would also like to point out that there are further issues to consider with regard to how this new definition is formulated.

Issues related to children born of war on the territories of the former Yugoslavia, as well as in other post-conflict settings, remain under-researched and understudied due to poorly-kept records and continued social stigma associated with the children and their mothers. From the point of view of human rights law, it has been argued that even the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Fourth Geneva Convention and Its Additional Protocols, whose goal is to protect children as a vulnerable population in general as well as to provide specific treatment for war-affected children, “might be said to be inapplicable” when it comes to the collective and individual protection of those affected, since they do “not outlaw discrimination against children born out of wedlock as a social category” (2). So, much more work is needed — as Delić et al. (1) rightly observe—to begin to adequately study children born of war, with the goal of providing effective collective and individual interventions, rehabilitation, empowerment, and social integration.

In a theoretical and academic sense, having a good working definition of the con-

cept “children born of war” would be a good starting point from which to begin to more broadly theorize issues relating to this population. If it is to be relevant and applicable to various contexts, this theorizing needs to be done in a multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary manner in order to make evident the links among conceptual, psycho-social, cultural, economic, political, and legal frameworks pertaining to children born of war in homogenous and heterogenous global contexts. An encompassing working definition is a solid basis for sustained, informed and systematic exploration and analysis of multitude of factors that affect all those groups that may be considered children born of war from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Establishing the points of comparison and commonality among those groups would then provide a solid starting point from which to examine, explore and analyze in greater detail and within diverse local contexts the divergence among the groups, and the establishment of their unique analytical features.

There is also a strategic benefit to adopting a broad definition of the category of children born of war in terms of an advocacy agenda as it relates to peace-building efforts, development of shared historical narratives and delivery of support programs in post-conflict societies. A significant problem facing present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, is the “widespread marginalization and highly selective reading of Tribunal verdicts and of the related historical record by ethno-national historians” (3). Conflicting historical interpretations are particularly detrimental to the daily lives of children born of war who continue to be subjected to forms of prejudice and discrimination and who are politically marginalized. Starting to build a body of knowledge relating to a broad category of children born of war will provide local and global institutions with the language and conceptual apparatus neces-

sary to produce historical syntheses of past conflicts, offering a more encompassing alternative to nationalist histories, and building a more unified civil framework for understanding the past. This approach would assist with the development of a “shared narrative concept as a tool of rebuilding trust between communities and engaging the past” (3), and a peace-building process in which children born of war are well positioned to take an active part by virtue of their “mixed” identity. The benefits of developing a shared narrative would also be seen in the context of educational policy and the potential adoption of common textbooks.

A related issue is the work of advocacy networks and civil society groups that is for the most part still sectarian in nature. This is true in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also in other recent post-conflict societies. In Bosnia, due to the lack of uniform legislation, many organizations have articulated an operative framework based on ethnic affiliation, rather than on survivors as individual citizens. In human rights literature it has been acknowledged that significant disagreement and animosity may exist among different advocacy groups who either oppose one another’s causes or how those causes are framed (4). Having access to literature that draws upon a broader definition of children born of war as a population that is affected by conflict in particularly adverse ways would help civil society groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina whose efforts have been focused on bridging ethnic divides. The strategic deployment of that definition in the context of their own advocacy work would provide them with a balanced shared narrative that stresses the commonalities among affected groups. This approach would in turn assist with the development of “multisectoral collaboration and interorganisational partnerships based on mutual respect” (5).

If, however, the definition of children born of war is to be broadened so as to ac-

quire foundational theoretical and practical value in the future study of the category “children born of war,” it would need to be further refined and articulated in a way that gestures toward completeness. In this case it would mean formulating it in such a way that the definition can apply to the same groups in any recent conflict setting, and any post-conflict society. While the Bosnian context does contain its own specific features and specific local factors that impact in unique ways on the lives of those we may refer to as children born of war, research shows that many other issues, such as those relating to the psychology of war-related trauma and resilience, ethnicity and human rights, the politics of identity and gender and social justice can be studied effectively as possessing certain common attributes across various global locations. **Conclusion.** So while the broadening of the definition as suggested by Delic et.al. (1) is advantageous from a theoretical and a strategic perspective, the definition itself would need to be formulated in an even broader way, so as not to make reference to any specific geographical context, but to encompass the broad category of children born of war wherever that population is found. This reformulation would ensure that the definition is applicable to the category of children born of war

in any global context, including Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Conflict of interest: The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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