

Trauma response and prevention: precondition for peace and justice

by Selmin Çalýþkan

Assistance to survivors of sexual violence should always be underpinned by international action and advocacy.

During the war in Bosnia, thousands of women were raped. Medica mondiale was founded in 1993 to respond to their urgent need for protection and support – and now also works with women in Albania, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Liberia, Iraq, India, Sudan, DRC, Uganda, Turkey and Mexico. We provide psychological, psychosocial, therapeutic, legal and medical support for women and girls. We also undertake political lobbying and awareness raising in order to build greater sensitivity within healthcare, social welfare and legal systems and humanitarian agencies. In strongly patriarchal societies we work to counteract the constant devaluation of women.

Survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) usually have little opportunity to talk about their experiences. Those who do know what has happened – their families or communities – often react negatively. Even if a survivor is not rejected by her family, she may well receive less food and support than the rest of the family and may not be allowed to visit a doctor. Women who have experienced sexual violence or abuse are at high risk of being re-victimised. Health professionals and others who have direct contact with displaced people must be made aware of these issues and should know how to gather information in a sensitive way, address the needs of sexually traumatised women, document sexual violence and secure more specialised help when needed.

Project staff at Medica Zenica – our Bosnia project – found that many husbands were supportive of their wives who had been raped during wartime because they themselves had survived concentration camps or torture. Knowledge about mass rape during the war was widespread and Muslim religious leaders issued

a *fatwa* that survivors of SGBV were innocent victims who should be fully respected. However, such understanding is lacking when it comes to rape outside wartime. Bosnian rape survivors still struggle to cope with prejudice and a lack of community support. We have worked with Bosnian NGOs to urge the authorities to acknowledge rape survivors as victims of war. As a result Bosnia has become the first post-conflict nation to provide rape survivors with a monthly pension – a potential example for other war-torn societies.

Medica Kosova has had to work within an extremely patriarchal society. Discussion of SGBV that occurred during wartime was completely taboo. Survivors were stigmatised and often excluded by their family and/or community. Staff had to develop special strategies to enable survivors to access the centre. By undertaking awareness raising and advocacy at different levels of society, the project has now been accepted by government authorities – and women suffer less social stigma. As there were no professionals specialised in the field of social, psychological or therapeutic work in Kosovo, Medica Kosova developed a four-year training programme for staff. Ten women have since gained university accreditation in the new profession of ‘psychosocial counsellor for women’.

“I was not afraid of being killed. I was afraid of being raped!”
Kosovan woman raped by
Serb militia men in 1999.

Vital role of International Criminal Court

National and international courts must acknowledge sexual violence

during war and at times of crisis as a grave breach of human rights. States should be encouraged to incorporate International Criminal Court (ICC)¹ provisions into local law in order to increase prosecution rates. Witnesses to sexual violence are often re-traumatised and stigmatised by trauma-insensitive investigation practices.

A Victims Trust Fund² was established by the ICC to channel compensation funds to victims – either directly to individuals or to agencies assisting survivors. The money is either paid directly by the perpetrator or, if the perpetrator lacks funds, from external sources such as government grants. However, women currently receive little from the ICC’s Victims Trust Fund because states are not providing adequate funding.

Will the ICC help transform the legal and cultural acceptance of sexual violence? If its norms become accepted as part of both military and domestic law, sexual violence will no longer be exempt from punishment and, it is hoped, will become less culturally tolerated. The survival of the court is crucial to legitimating norms of gender justice and shifting both blame and shame from victim to perpetrator. This requires committed, knowledgeable and sensitised judicial personnel as well as persistent civil society engagement. Women’s NGOs must remain vigilant, supporting efforts to ensure sexual violence is no longer exempt from punishment, empowering women to reject the socially-imposed role of shamed victim and enabling women to obtain redress and to participate fully in peacebuilding.

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¹ www.icc-cpi.int

² www.icc-cpi.int/vtf.html