21 Years After the War, Bosnian Rape Survivors Still Grapple with Trauma and Stigma

Twenty-one years since the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement that ended the Bosnian War, survivors of wartime sexual violence are still grappling with serious physical and psychological trauma, says Right Livelihood Award Laureate and medica mondiale founder Monika Hauser.

Hauser and her organisation medica mondiale have helped over 70,000 traumatised women and girls in war zones and post-conflict countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, DR Congo, Liberia and Afghanistan.

Between 20,000 and 50,000 women and girls were raped during the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Systematic mass rape of Muslim Bosnian women was carried out as a method of warfare by Bosnian-Serbian and Bosnian-Croatian militia.

In a recent study conducted jointly with its Bosnian partner organisation Medica Zenica, medica mondiale interviewed 51 survivors of war rape and sexual violence from Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to their findings, two decades after the war:

- 57% of rape survivors are still suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD);
- 93.5% of the women are suffering from gynaecological problems;
- 65% regularly take psychopharmaceutical drugs such as antidepressants;
- Over 75% of women reported that rape continues to influence their lives with husbands or men in general;
- Almost one in five women reported having had difficulties in getting pregnant after the rape.

“The long-term consequences of wartime rape are truly horrific and totally neglected. Many survivors want to speak up so that the world will know what happened to them – but it is not only up to them to break the silence. The reality is that, even 21 years after the Bosnian war, it is apparent that society, community and politicians are still not ready,” says Hauser.

Despite international attention, no process of coming to terms with war rape crimes found its way into the Dayton Peace Agreement signed in Paris on 14 December 1995. Moreover, many perpetrators are still living free and unpunished, while rape survivors report lack of sensitivity and red tape when testifying in Bosnian courts.
In addition to the acute physical and emotional suffering, many women are also stigmatized in their communities. Although in 2006 Bosnia and Herzegovina passed legislation that granted a special status along with a modest pension of EUR 280 to survivors of war rape, less than 1,000 women have obtained the civilian victim of war status by the end of 2016.

“Sexual violence continues to be used as a weapon of war to this day around the world. What we have learned in Bosnia and Herzegovina is that the wounds of wartime rape take generations to heal. We must seek justice for the victims and offer long-term stress- and trauma-sensitive support to survivors of sexual violence in all conflict situations,” Hauser stresses.

medica mondiale calls on governments to make concrete policy changes that would go a long way towards the implementation of UN Resolution 1325 for women, peace and security, including healthcare reforms, inclusion of women in peace negotiations, and consistent prosecution of perpetrators in courts, notably the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

Monika Hauser received the Right Livelihood Award in 2008 “for her tireless commitment to working with women who have experienced the most horrific sexual violence in some of the most dangerous countries in the world, and campaigning for them to receive social recognition and compensation.”

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The full study ‘We are still alive: Research on the long-term consequences of war rape and coping strategies of survivors in Bosnia and Herzegovina’ is available from: http://www.medicamondiale.org/fileadmin/redaktion/5_Service/Mediathek/Dokumente/Enghish/Documentations_studies/141128_Research_We-Are-Still-Alive_CR-Medica-Zenica_medica-mondiale.pdf
About the Right Livelihood Award

The Right Livelihood Award was established in 1980 to “honour and support courageous people and organisations offering visionary and exemplary solutions to the root causes of global problems”. It has become widely known as the ‘Alternative Nobel Prize’ and there are now 166 Laureates from 68 countries. In addition to presenting the annual awards, the Right Livelihood Award Foundation supports its Laureates, particularly those who may be in danger due to the nature of their work. Jakob von Uexkull, a Swedish-German professional philatelist, sold his business to provide the original funding. Since then, the awards have been financed by individual donors.

About medica mondiale

Established in 1993, medica mondiale is a non-governmental organisation based in Germany which stands up for women and girls in war and crisis zones throughout the world. medica mondiale supports women and girls having experienced sexualised violence, regardless of political, ethnic or religious affiliation. Together with women from around the world, medica mondiale is committed to helping women to lead a dignified and self-determined life.