

# Women, Rape, and War: The Continued Trauma of Refugees and Displaced Persons in Croatia

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Rape has been used as a tactic of terror in many wars (Brownmiller 1975, Bergman 1974). Rape was a weapon of terror as the German Hun marched through Belgium in World War I; gang rape was part of the orchestrated riots of *Kristallnacht* which marked the beginning of Nazi campaigns against the Jews. It was a weapon of revenge as the Russian Army marched to Berlin in World War II, it was used when the Japanese raped Chinese women in the city of Nanking, when the Pakistani Army battled Bangladesh, and when the American G. I.'s made rape in Vietnam a "standard operating procedure aimed at terrorizing the population into submission" (Bergman 1974: 69). But in these wars, rape did not receive the widespread publicity it has in the on-going war in former Yugoslavia.

The situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia provides a broader socio-cultural context of conflict between different groups of men. Acts of rape in this context not only attack women, they also humiliate the husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons of the victims because they demonstrate the men's inability to protect their women. This humiliation is especially intense in the Balkans where the *honor/shame complex* is so strong and female chastity is central to family and community honor (Schneider 1971, Davis 1977).

Rape is not only important on individual, familial, community levels but also on the international level because all sides in the conflict use the stories of rape as propaganda for political gain. In addition, governments need to make policy in response to the rapes, regulate treatment of victimized women, access to abortion or adoption, and legal responses to the aggressors. Furthermore, war rapes and gender-based violence needs to be defined as a form of torture and as a war crime.

The war in former Yugoslavia has produced over three million refugees and displaced persons, the majority of whom are women. How many are victims of rape? Documentation in the war-torn region and in the on-going conflict is difficult to obtain. However, a report compiled by a fact-finding mission of the European Community a year ago (December 1992) stated that 20,000 women have been raped by Bosnian Serb soldiers as "part of a deliberate pattern of

abuse" where "rapes cannot be seen as incidental to the main purposes of the aggression but as serving a strategic purpose in itself"--war rapes are termed as a form of *ethnic cleansing* or genocide (European Community Report 1992).

Many mass rapes in Bosnia-Herzegovina have occurred in what the Bosnian government terms "*rape camps*" in which the conquered women were forcibly held and raped by Serbian soldiers. Many women are faced with two cruel fates: either to survive repeated rape and torture or be killed outright. The names and locations of *rape camps* reflect pre-existing attitudes toward sexuality and courtship but in a cruel new context. *Rape camps* are often situated in former coffee houses and restaurants. Their names symbolize both the traditional and the modern. At one end of the spectrum are places called "*Vilina Vlas*" ("Nymph's Hair/tresses") and "*Kafana Sonja*" ("Coffeehouse Sonja"). To a weary traveler in the Balkans these names symbolize the traditional, quaint poetic corner or respite, a *place of pleasure*. The implication is that rather than concentration camps these are brothels where willing women satisfy the desires of the flesh. The symbolism ignores the coercive nature of the camps and contributes to blaming the women for their own victimization. On the other end of the spectrum, places with names such as *Laser* ("Laser") and *Fast Food Restaurant* suggest the modern, Western lifestyle to the people from the Balkans. Such names are correlated with perceived Western promiscuity and sexual permissiveness. Both types of names suggest sexual license to men who believe that they can do any kind of violently sexual act with impunity. For women, these places are *pakano na zemlji* ("hell on earth") In many camps, the majority of the female victims have died, either from gunshots, bleeding as a consequence of gang rape, or by suicide motivated by shame.

Stories of rape have come predominantly from women who were forced by their experience to chose isolation, all have come from divorces women, widows, or unmarried women who do not have to contend with outraged husbands or other family members. This is not surprising in a culture where female and male honor depend on woman's chastity. If a man believes that a woman had sex with another, whether by force or not he must reject to salvage his own male pride. If the woman was lucky and did not get pregnant, she will bury her story inside of her to spare her family the dishonor. Anything that forces her to the public will be her further tragedy. Such a desperate situation intensifies the traditional gender hierarchy and male/female roles. The traditional gender dichotomy is further intensified in the refugee camps. The women

are not only assuming the traditional tasks, they are primary care-givers and "household" managers. They are fulfilling several roles with the ever-present series of losses and traumas. Unfortunately, war rape is not the only traumatic and horrific event that a woman in this war is experiencing. The following is an excerpt from Asija, a refugee Bosnian Muslim woman, who has been living in a Croatian refugee camp for the last 15 months:

I was trying to flee my village with my two small children while the bullets were flying around me. My neighbors were yelling, 'Asija, come back, there is no where to go, it is not worth it, come back you can't run away.' Because of the flying bullets I couldn't return to my own home, so I ran into my neighbor's house. The Serbs came... They yelled at us and said, 'Who's in the house? Come out!' As we walked out they told us 'put your arms up!'...I had my son with me and my daughter who was ten months old. I held her in one hand and held the other hand up for more than twenty minutes. There were other women and children present. They threatened the thirteen-year-old son of my neighbor's by taking their knives out and by starting to sharpen them. They were yelling that they would kill him, and then they began to slaughter his rabbits in front of him. They were looking for water and towels and his mother turned around. They told her, 'We will rape you. Why are you turning around! Don't move!' None of us dared to look, dared to move, if you do, they kill you immediately. All around the people were moaning and groaning, they were being massacred and to this day I don't know who they were because we held our hands up and could not look around...

After the massacre the women had to bury the dead bodies. Asija buried her husband who was 28 years old, her brother-in-law who was 33, her father-in-law who was 63, another brother-in-law, one nephew who was 17 years old, a second nephew who was 23 years old and a third nephew who was 16 years old. While they were burying the bodies the armed Serb soldiers were circling around them and saying, "We will kill you as well."

We were all in shock. No one was crying, my son who was six-years-old and my baby daughter, saw their family like that...No one even shed a tear. Thirteen of us women were

burying the massacred bodies for about ten hours-six in front of one house, seven in front of the other house...

However, today, Asija and the other women in refugee camps are primarily concerned with the existential problems that they face, and not with the psychological and physical trauma or scars left by the war. Their main concern is to have their own space, a place they can call home.

When I was visiting a coastal hotel that was housing women from the so-called "temporarily occupied villages" from the Dalmatian hinterland, they were all sitting in a semi-dark room on chairs pulled and nailed against the wall and were quietly talking and knitting. (Footnote: chairs being nailed to the wall is from the communist regime because this was the way that order was enforced; people were unable to sit in a circle).

Over two years had passed and they still belonged to nowhere. The solace in which they had known how to live and in how to survive was taken away from them. For them, the present is just a wait. The loneliness and fear of returning to their ruined (devastated) homes and their broken lives is their primary concern. "If we die, what will happen to our bodies?" one woman asked me. (It is the custom in the Dalmatian hinterland, as in other parts of the Mediterranean, to have ones' funeral clothes all picked out, neatly folded and stored in a hope chest). Naturally, they will be buried, but these women have saved in their hope chests along with their wedding dresses, their funeral attires. They were now uneasy and uncertain about their road to death as they waited in the semi-dark hotel hall sitting in chairs and knitting the pieces of their broken lives. They will remain nailed there despite the Council of the Security and Cooperation in Geneva, the United Nations, and all the bilateral and multilateral negotiations. The importance of home to them cannot be underestimated: one woman told me that they had to "touch the threshold once again" to be sane.

Loss of home and loss of land is synonymous with the loss of identity throughout the Balkans. Once the land is lost, the identity and self-esteem are lost. The psychological relationship to the land is a fundamental trait in the whole conscious and subconscious behavior of the Balkan peasant. Land is considered a sacred thing. The importance of land is seen in the plethora of linguistic terms that differentiate land by its use, size of the field, how the soil is cultivated, and overall quality (Olujic, 1991). Parts of Eastern Croatia, called Slavonia, including the city of Vukovar, have fallen to the Serbs. After the fall of Vukovar, a song called "do not

touch my fields because I will return" has become so popular that it is played during all social occasions, family gatherings, and weddings. Many refugee women who never wrote before are now writing poems and short stories. Although many are depressed, criticized, and lonely, they find strength to draw out and place meanings in their experiences, especially drawing upon the symbolism from their past, peaceful life. The following verse is an excerpt of a poem written by a refugee woman from Vukovar:

We have no soil and no grain  
No one is concerned about our pain  
We have no longer our beautiful costumes  
That our grandmothers have woven  
There are no more young tamburitza men  
There are no more daughter-in-laws.

While the West is referring to the war criminals as "Mr. Milosevic," or Mr. "Karadzic," to these old women no one has said "Madam." In the Western media they became a nameless, faceless group, victims with neither name nor identity. They have lost their self esteem. And yet each one knows herself, her own story, her own personal experience. If they had been perceived as the individuals they were from the beginning, one of them told me, perhaps the West would have been moved to intervene at that time. "If they had seen who we really are in pictures of the war, if they had valued us as people, the world would have much less of a headache with us now," one of them told me.

Unfortunately, I do not have time here to discuss (for the oral presentation) several important theoretical issues that are surfacing from my research. But it will suffice to say that new forms of gender definitions are emerging from this conflict. I already alluded to the *women's barricades of silence* which are their strategy for their own survival and protection, but at the same time, they are reinforcing traditional gender ideology. In addition, sexual coercion and gender-based violence, mostly done to women, but also to some men and children is a *public ritual of torture* which points not only to complete humiliation of the individual, but of the family, community, and an entire nation. Furthermore, public violence (i.e., public rituals of torture) is an affirmation of not only male bonding but also of power and dominance.

In closing, despite the fact that war and armed conflicts are mostly the cause of an overwhelming number of refugees throughout the world, the international community uses legal definitions of the refugee status based on the concept of individual persecutions. I was urged by several Croatian and Bosnian social scientists (e.g. Cimic, Sakic, etc.) to state that it is important to clearly define aggression and war as the cause of exile, and to take *political* and not only humanitarian initiatives in solving refugee problems, because the basic questions of war and peace, conditions which give rise to a mass exodus of people, need to be addressed. As we are discussing the theoretical, conceptual and practical issue of refugees and displaced persons, at this very moment, forced resettlement or flux and shifts of populations are occurring in Bosnia and Croatia.

In the second week of November, 1993 as I was writing this paper while in Croatia, there was a mention in the Croatian newspaper (*Slovodna Dalmacija*) that a Munich paper (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*) was going to print the front page of its weekly magazine, using half a liter of blood in its printing ink, donated by eight refugee women in order to highlight the atrocities in Bosnia. The weekly was published on 19th of November, 1993.