Bosnia: Child Abuse Taboo

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Molesters have little to fear from a society that shuns any real debate on sexual abuse.

Ajla doesn’t come across as someone who’s suffered much in life.

A tall, pretty girl with long brown hair, she smiles readily until she recalls her harrowing life story. Then her smile vanishes, the sparkle in her eyes disappears and she starts nervously plucking one cigarette after another from her purse.

“I really loved my grandfather. I trusted him. He was the person I loved most,” said Ajla, not her real name. “I never thought he could do something so repulsive.”

Ajla’s grandfather, in fact her grandmother’s second husband, began sexually abusing her when she was only seven years old.

“He asked me to touch his penis, but I refused,” she said. “Then he grabbed my hand and forced me to do it and said no one must ever find out about our little game.

“He took every opportunity to be alone with me, and I had to keep quiet and pretend that everything was fine.”

Ajla’s story is one that almost never reaches the country’s newspapers, radio shows or television screens. Child abuse is a taboo issue in Bosnia and Hercegovina, which has yet to take any specific legal measures to tackle the issue.

“It is not treated as a priority,” Slobodan Nagradic, assistant minister for human rights and refugees and chairman of the Children’s Council, told IWPR.

Nagradic said the state was now taking “some measures to deal with the situation”. He referred to a report submitted by his ministry on implementing a convention outlawing discrimination against women, which referred directly to child abuse.

Detailing all known relatively recent cases, the report identified 90 victims from 1996 to 2002, 68 of whom were girls under the age of 14.

While the ministry report at least raised the issue and pushed it into the public domain, Bosnia has yet to pass any legislation outlawing violence within the family, although the country’s Helsinki Committee for Human Rights has lobbied for one since 2000.

Mirsada Poturkovic, director of the Centre for Social Work, thinks the passage of a new law would enable the authorities to be more efficient in preventing child abuse and could lead to the founding of special institutions and secure homes for the victims.
But not everyone puts much faith in legislation. Dusko Tomic, head of the Sarajevo branch of the First Children’s Embassy - Medjashi, an NGO that lobbies for children’s rights, said simply passing a law would change little.

“Violence is a way of life [in Bosnia],” he said.

Zlatko Ilic, coordinator of the children’s rights department at the Institution of the Ombudsman in the Bosnian Federation, is also sceptical, adding that child abuse would be hard to penalise in a society where it remains such a closely guarded secret.

“We are unable to gather information on child molesting, because no one comes to us,” he said. “Our citizens see child molestation as a simple fact, presented by the media.”

Ajla was unusual. She dug deep into her soul to find the courage to tell a friend what had happened to her, but encountered little sympathy or understanding.

“When I told my girlfriend what happened, she stopped treating me like a friend,” Ajla said. “She treated me like a deficient person.”

Nasiha Osmanovic, a social worker in the Sarajevo-based ADL Barcelona, which aids abused women and children, said the fact that most children keep quiet about their abusers makes it very hard to locate, or deal with, the problem.

“Molesters put their victims in a submissive position and force them to tell no one about it,” Osmanovic said.

This makes it very difficult even to estimate the scale of the problem. “We’ve had callers sobbing on the phone who called four times per night trying to say something,” Dusko Tomic said. “But they couldn’t. They couldn’t hold back their tears.”

Ajla said her experience scarred her and made her determined to keep her story to herself. She never reported her grandfather for molesting her. “I grow stronger in my intention to keep what happened to me a secret for the rest of my life,” she said. “The damage has already been done.”

Mladen Milosavljevic, a child abuse expert, said that even when the perpetrators of such attacks are caught, which is rare, the sentences are lenient. “They are usually sentenced to short prison terms or even get off with a suspended sentence,” he said.

Recalling a handful of court cases he had been involved with, he added, “The supreme court acquitted one molester who had abused the girl aged four, while two others got 30 and 18 months respectively.”

Molesters who have served their often short sentences are not then obliged to maintain any further contact with state institutions.

“The law is on their side,” Tomic said. “People like that are marked for life in the west, but out here they just move to another place and continue to molest children.”
Ajla notes with bitterness that the grandfather who betrayed her trust remains a pillar of society who continues to live only a few kilometres away from her home.

“He is still a respectable member of the religious community, an honest pensioner and a caring family member,” she said.

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