Invisible Casualties of War

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Bosnia's raped women are being shunned by a society that refuses to see them as victims.

Nine-year-old Edin is one of thousands of children in Bosnia growing up without a father. But while others have a grave to visit, or photographs to treasure, Edin has neither. His mother Safeta has one single, terrible memory of his father. "He lit a candle or a lighter and made his choice," she said. "He was a Serb from Zemun. Even 20 years from now I'd recognise him."

Safeta is a "raped woman", to use a label which became commonplace for women who fell victim to systematic sexual abuse in the first year of the Bosnian war. Edin's father is the man who raped her.

Today, these women are the invisible casualties of the war, overlooked and often shunned. The fate of their children is even more tragic. Edin is one of a tiny minority who live with their birth mothers - many of the other women abandoned their babies, or even murdered them.

In the summer of 1992, chilling reports of mass deportations from eastern Bosnia and detention camps in north-west Bosnia, were accompanied by accounts of mass rape. There were even rumours of a plan to impregnate thousands of non-Serb women to fuel ethnic hatred. The exact numbers of women raped will never be known, not least since some of the victims were later murdered. The highest estimate, delivered to a European Union commission in Brussels in February 1993, was 50,000.

Behind the statistics were women like Safeta, detained for three days in an abandoned house outside Zvornik, north-east Bosnia. There, she was raped by a group of soldiers and volunteers from Serbia. Two seventeen-year-old girls were detained with her. "One of them, Amra, was raped by 13 men," she said. Safeta, then 29, was luckier - she was raped only once.

Today, Safeta and Edin live together in a small house in Zivince, outside Tuzla. The former works at the Vive Zena womens' centre in Tuzla, which provides counselling for rape victims and includes some raped women among its staff. Now 40, she talks openly about her experiences, turning away only occasionally. But she is unusual. Shame and ostracism drive many women to conceal their ordeals, another reason a definitive estimate has been so difficult to establish. Safeta's story has an uplifting ending, but it sheds light on the tragic experiences of the many women.

Many raped women were deliberately kept in detention until it was too late for them to get an abortion. Safeta was six months pregnant by the time she arrived in Tuzla, and no one would perform the operation at that late stage. Edin was born on April 14, 1993. Unable to prevent his birth, his mother refused to even look at him, claiming she would strangle him. Edin was deposited in a Tuzla orphanage, and Safeta began her life as a refugee in Zivince.

Teufika Ibrahimefendic, a clinical psychologist at the Vive Zena centre, where Safeta works, said, "It is the women who have kept their ordeal a secret for the last ten years who concern psychiatrists the most. They conceal it to try and protect themselves, but this creates an intolerable pressure. I once heard a woman describe how every time she remembers being raped, she stands under a cold shower until she freezes."

The Hague tribunal has recognised that rape was used as a systematic weapon of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, making it indictable as a war crime. Rape formed part of the case against the three-member Foca group, sentenced to a total of 60 years in prison for crimes against humanity committed in eastern Bosnia in the early Nineties. Ante Furundzija, the commander of a special Bosnian Croat unit in central Bosnia was charged with watching the rape of a Bosnian woman, not intervening and not punishing the rapists.
Proceedings against Hazim Delic in connection with the Celebici prison camp also confirmed rape as a war crime.

But regardless of international law, raped women are still not recognised as victims within Bosnia. At best, they are regarded as tarnished, at worst as "fallen women" who somehow invited their own misfortune. For years, Safeta says she endured the whispers and pointing fingers of other women in Zivince. The taboo around rape even extended to her family. Her mother, sister and brother-in-law were supportive, but not her father or younger brother. "My father never asked me what had happened or where my child was," she said.

Safeta remained in Bosnia throughout her pregnancy, but many women who had been raped in prison camps in north-west Bosnia were evacuated to third countries via Croatia. Director of the Zagreb Centre for Women Victims of War, CWVV, Nela Pamukovic, recalled two pregnant raped women who took refuge with her organisation, "One of them kept her baby and left for the US with her parents. The other threw her newly-born child into the Sava river. She was charged with infanticide, but did not stand trial after doctors diagnosed diminished responsibility."

Like Safeta, many women rejected their babies immediately after giving birth. In Zagreb, most deliveries took place at the Petrovo maternity hospital. From there, according to CWVV and the Zagreb Caritas office, unwanted babies were taken to the Vladimir Nazor orphanage or the Goljak centre for children with special needs. At this point, it becomes difficult to keep track of the babies. Records were kept of all children admitted, but staff had no way of knowing which babies were the offspring of raped mothers, not least because some women didn't tell anyone they had been raped.

Moreover, the aftermath of war in Croatia and the raging conflict in Bosnia made tracking the children even harder "We didn't keep track of any of the children who came to us in that period," said a hospital source who did not want to be named. "Our priority was to provide them with care, regardless of where they came from."

Zagreb Caritas received around 150 raped women, of whom around 60 per cent were pregnant. Director Jelena Brajsa remembers the first 15 pregnant women who arrived in 1993. All had been repeatedly raped. After delivery, four babies were transferred to Obrenovo for medical treatment, two mothers kept their babies and the remaining nine were collected by the Bosnian embassy and Red Cross and later returned to Bosnia. There, two were taken by their families, two were adopted and the remainder placed in institutions.

In general, the babies suffered from the stigma of the crime which had created them. "I once attended a meeting of the Association of Bosnian Women in Zagreb, which is now defunct," said Brajsa. "They discussed the fate of babies of raped women and there was a general consensus that these children should be taken as far away from Bosnia as possible."

A doctor at the Goljak centre for children with special needs recalls how nine children of raped women were admitted to the centre in 1995. He even considered adopting one of the children. "One little boy was very sweet and I spent a lot of time with him. However, my wife, who is Bosnian herself, wouldn't even consider adoption. People have something against these children, even though they are not to blame for any of this." He does not know where the children went after they left the centre.

Six months after leaving her son in a Tuzla orphanage, Safeta set out to find him. Thoughts of the baby had been haunting her. "I couldn't sleep for four months. After six months it became unbearable. If I hadn't found him when I did, I probably wouldn't be alive now," she said.

A social worker told Safeta that her son had been admitted to hospital. Edin was suffering from malnutrition and had chewed his fingers to the bone. When she found him, she held him silently for 20 minutes. "I could see that he looked like me and that he was healthy. I don't know how I made it home that
"day," she recalled.

Although neither she nor Edin ever left Bosnia, Safeta was still fortunate to find her son. Orphanages and hospitals were overloaded and other women who underwent a change of heart may not have been so lucky. "In 1993 alone, we admitted 700 children and the capacity of the orphanage was only 110," said Advia Hercegovac of the Vojo Peric orphanage in Tuzla. "It is possible that many of those were the babies of raped women, but there was chaos at the time and we had more important tasks than keeping detailed records." Children who were later adopted were subject to the usual rules protecting their identities and those of their adoptive parents.

Finding Edin was not the end of the story for Safeta. He remained in the orphanage for another seven years, while his mother summoned up the courage and the means to bring him home. Raped women who kept their babies are a tiny minority, according to Fadila Memisevic of the Association for the Threatened Peoples of Bosnia. Many more may have wanted to do so, but the pressures they were placed under were intolerable.

Mirha Pojskic of Medica, an NGO in Zenica which focuses on helping traumatised women, recalls the case of one woman who was raped close to the border with Serbia. Even though she was a Bosniak, the woman fled to Serbia where she adopted a Serbian name. Unable to tell even her closest family about her rape and pregnancy, the woman gave birth and kept her child for a year. Finally, with no money or family support, she left him in a Serbian orphanage. The orphanage discovered that the baby was a Bosnian citizen and insisted that she remove him.

She then took her son to her own parents in Sarajevo, but they refused to accept him. He, in turn, developed a constant fear that his mother would abandon him. After some months, Pojskic received a letter from the Sarajevo social services saying the woman wanted Medica to take in her baby, because she could no longer feed him. "I begged the welfare people in Sarajevo to find the woman a job so she could support her child, but they did nothing," she said.

Another woman approached Medica after being raped in Brcko. She was accompanied by her mother, who kept insisting the pregnancy was her daughter's own fault. In the end, this woman did manage to keep her child.

After a period of living alone and drinking heavily, Safeta began to stitch her life back together. She found a job, bought a piece of land and started building a house. She visited her son regularly and was driven by a vision of living with him under the same roof. "That was what I lived for, the moment when darkness would turn into light. And if people disapproved, I couldn't care less," she said.

At the beginning of this year, Pojskic launched a campaign to obtain civilian war victim status for women who were raped. This status, granted by the ministry for human rights and refugees, has a number of benefits attached. "By entitling them to health insurance and other benefits granted to victims of war, by helping them to find jobs, we hope that women will finally come forward and admit they were raped. We may then find out how many women were victims of this crime," she said.

Currently, only former camp detainees are recognised as civilian victims. It is hoped that by extending this status to raped women, they will be de-stigmatised. Official recognition of their trauma may finally dispel the notion - most prevalent in small towns and villages - that they were in some way responsible for what happened to them.

Today, Safeta proudly shows off photos of her son. With blue eyes and light brown hair, he takes after her. Traces of the ordeal mother and son have endured can be seen in a certain reserve between them. "Sometimes I feel an urge to hug him, to kiss him all over, but I only ever kiss him at night, while he is asleep," she said. Edin too is discreet. Hidden behind a curtain, he likes to stand at the window and wait for
his mother to arrive home from work. He has never asked about his father.

Some of the names of the women and children featured in this investigation have been changed to protect their identities

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**Location:** Serbia
Croatia
Bosnia and Herzegovina

Source URL: https://iwpr.net/global-voices/invisible-casualties-war