Research on the long term consequences of war rape and coping strategies of survivors in Bosnia-Herzegovina, medica mondiale and Medica Zenica (2014)
„We are still alive. We have been harmed but we are brave and strong“

Research questions focussing on:

- Consequences of war rape and sexual violence on survivors lives, health and relationships
- How does Bosnian society treat survivors today? Social acknowledgement
- Coping strategies and sources of resilience in the past 20 years
- Impact of Medica Zenica
Consultants and Activists of Medica Zenica and medica mondiale involved in the research
Values: feminist perspective and stress- and trauma-sensitivity

- Research done by women, for women, about women, from women's perspective, research for change
- Interviews with survivors were done by trained staff members of Medica
- Informed consent, feedback during research process and authorization of survivors
- Research and reflective group which was centered around Medica Zenica (interviewers of survivors)
- Counsellor for survivors, Life story interviews in safe settings
- Survivors choose where to meet
- Debriefing sessions for all especially interviewers
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Methodology

- Multi-method design: questionnaire with open and closed questions, the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire Bosnia and Herzegovina version (HTQ-BH; Oruč et al., 2008), the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI; Derogatis, 1993) and the Brief Cope Questionnaire (Brief COPE; Carver, 1997)

- Seven participants also took part in life story interviews, and key informant interviews were conducted with two relevant ministries, alongside focus group discussions with six NGOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina
Life Story of Zehra:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dd9M9dmCfdc

Video: “The Story of Zehra” - research on the long-term consequences of war rape in Bosnia
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Key findings of the research: health

The mental and general health situation of survivors is of grave concern:

- 57% are suffering from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms
- More than 85% see a doctor on regular basis
- 57% perceived their health condition “as bad”
- 65% take medicines regularly, half of them already for the past 20 years
- More than 58% suffer from at least four or more gynaecological symptoms
- 11% reported cancer
“We are still alive. We have been harmed but we are brave and strong”

Key findings of the research: relationships

- More than 75% reported that the rape experience influenced their lives with husbands and partners
- More than half of the women reported that the rape experience affected their relationships with their children
- Indications of transgenerational effects of war rape consequences on children
Many women reported using coping strategies: diverting attention,

BUT: Women are still immersed in traumatic memories in their daily lives

Relationships with children, grandchildren and also with husbands, family members are their main source of resilience

Care, availability, understanding, acceptance, safe space for sharing playing major role in their recovery

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Key findings of the research: coping/resilience
“We are still alive. We have been harmed but we are brave and strong“

Key findings of the research: Lack social acknowledgement

- Ongoing stigmatisation in communities, sexualised wartime violence is still a taboo in BiH
- Lack of protection for witnesses
- Insensitivity towards survivors in institutions
- The status of “Civilian War Victim” – not an instrument of social recognition?
- In contrast to male war veterans, who are regarded as heroes by themselves and others, the affected women do not perceive this status to be an expression of social acknowledgement.
- “So what, why didn’t she take care of herself like I did, why nobody raped me”
"We are still alive. We have been harmed but we are brave and strong"

Conclusions

- War rape leaves a deep and long-lasting wound on the survivors.
- War rape not only wounds its survivors, but affects the whole society. Transgenerational effects are a challenge.
- The trauma of war rape survivor is a social, economic and political issue in BiH.
- Survivors need direct services and social acknowledgement.
- There is no "healing" without social acknowledgment, justice and transformation of gender roles!
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Research for Change

„I dont want to take medication, I want to laugh“

- Training programs in the health sector: education on the impact of conflict related rape trauma on health, trauma-sensitive approach
- Nationwide hotline number offering help and support 24/7 to survivors of war rape and sexual violence.
- Campaign “Stop Stigmatization”
- Advocacy on national, european and international level (PSVI)
Research "We are still alive" on the long-term consequences of war rape in Bosnia Herzegovina
Thank you for Listening