

## 20 Years After Bosnian War, Rape Survivors Still Live With Trauma

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Former Bosnian Serb commander Ratko Mladic has been convicted of crimes committed during the 1990s Bosnian conflict, including mass rapes by his troops. The survivors of sexual violence from that time still endure mental and physical health problems today.



*An image taken in 1993 of a woman who had been raped by Serbian soldiers. More than 50,000 women and girls suffered rape and other forms of sexual violence during the conflicts that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia between 1992 and 1995.*

M was taken to the concentration camp in August 1992. A holding pen for Bosnian Muslims and Croats run by Serb troops, it was part of a bitter game of violence drawn along ethnic and religious lines.

“Every night, women and children were taken and raped. Men were beaten up,” M says, hunching over to look at the floor.

“I experienced sexual violence ... everything I tell you here is very little [of what happened].”

We are meeting in the industrial town of Zenica, in central Bosnia-Herzegovina. M has asked that her name, and the name of the camp she was forced to endure for three months, are not published, for fear of reprisals against her or her family.

One day during their detention, M’s sister, who was also kept in the camp, went to meet the arrival of a humanitarian aid convoy, leaving M on her own. The separation was unusual: Aware

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of the prevalence of rape in the camp, the sisters were usually inseparable. While her sister was gone, M was assaulted by guards.

“I was left alone. Then many things happened between five of them [Serb guards] and me,” M recounts.

On November 22, former Bosnian Serb commander Ratko Mladic was jailed for life on charges of genocide and other war crimes during the 1990s Bosnian conflict, including allowing troops under his command to commit mass rapes of Bosniak women and girls.

It’s estimated that as many as 50,000 women and girls suffered rape and other forms of sexual violence during the conflicts that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia between 1992 and 1995. Exact victim numbers will probably never be determined.

Women were subject to rape and other atrocities in concentration camps and so-called “rape camps.” The use of sexual violence was so widespread during the conflict that the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, set up in 1993 to investigate allegations of atrocities, included rape as a crime against humanity.

Today, more than two decades on, the survivors are still suffering.

In a major report released in September, Amnesty International said sexual violence survivors of the Bosnian conflict suffered “devastating and often lasting physical and psychological consequences that still affect their day-to-day lives.”

As war crimes trials continue across Bosnia-Herzegovina, survivors of sexual violence need long-term support, says Irma Siljak, programs assistant at Medica Zenica, an NGO assisting women and child victims of war.

“This topic is not closed. Many people want to put it under the rug and say it’s done. It’s not done,” she says. “They need help for a long time. Still now, they have consequences. They think [painful] thoughts every day. They cannot sleep.”

Those consequences frequently include social anxiety and depression, says Azra Hrcic-Sehic, a psychologist at Medica Zenica. “A significant number have problems with people, and problems in marriage. If they tell their husbands, some of the women get divorced. Some have never told their families.”

M has been taking medication since the end of the war to help ease the anxiety and trauma resulting from her experience. She has injections of “very strong tranquilizers” every 21 days. “This is how I function. I cannot sleep without them,” she tells News Deeply.

Survivors’ troubles are not just psychological. During the conflict, women were often subject to gang rape or serial penetrations, leaving them with severe physical health conditions.

Research copublished by Medica Zenica and women’s rights organization Medica Mondiale in 2014, based on a survey of survivors of rape or sexual violence in the conflict, found that one-third still suffered physical consequences.

One respondent had her uterus surgically removed due to consequences of rape while another reported contracting urinary tuberculosis.

“Even 20 years after the war, more than 58 percent suffer from four or more gynecological problems that are typically associated with the physical consequences of sexual violence,” the report found.

### Support in Court



*Protesters stood outside the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia waiting to hear the verdict on Bosnian Serb military commander Ratko Mladic, on November 22 in The Hague, Netherlands.*

Since 2004, courts across Bosnia have convicted 134 perpetrators of sexual violence war crimes. But with nearly 200 similar cases outstanding, Amnesty International warns it could be another decade before they are all heard.

And every time a case is brought before the judge, it risks subjecting survivors to further psychological and physical suffering.

Siljak, from Medica Zenica, says some women have told her about “horrible experiences” they have had while giving their testimonies at court. “They were reporting that they had encounters with perpetrators in the same hall, that they were unprotected, and no one cared for them after they gave their testimony.”

In 2011, the organization launched a network to link social services with judicial and policing services, and to educate the authorities on how to approach survivors of sexual violence. They also make sure women have access to psychological care before and after giving testimony, building on the minimal – often one-person – witness support teams in Bosnian courts.

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The European Commission has recognized the effectiveness of the model, which Medica Zenica and three other NGOs are rolling out across Bosnia-Herzegovina.

### **No Access to Aid**

Despite the efforts of advocates and NGOs, there are still survivors who can't access the medical and financial aid that would improve their quality of life.

The case for long-term support services is strengthened by the fact that some victims are only just now coming forward and revealing their traumatic experiences.

"We have cases of many women who are at the age of 50, 60 or 70, who decided to speak up for the first time," Siljak says.

"They feel that their life is coming to an end and they don't want their story to die with them. They want someone to listen to them, and their story to be recorded."