

Peace prize offers hope for sexual violence survivors, but not peace

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*As part of an op-ed series, FIU News shares the expertise and diverse perspectives of members of the university community. In this piece, **Michaela Moura-Koçoglu**, instructor in the **Center for Women's and Gender Studies**, offers her view in response to the recent announcement of the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize awarded to a survivor and a doctor fighting against rape as a weapon of war. The opinions expressed in the piece are her own.*

By Michaela Moura-Koçoglu



The Nobel Peace Center, Oslo, Norway.

These are scary times for survivors of sexual violence: Despite a wave of activism on social media as documented under hashtags such as #MeToo, #WeBelieveWomen, and #WhyIDidntReport, survivors who dare go public experience malicious and life-threatening backlash, calling into question the efficacy of awareness raising. The announcement of the **2018 Nobel Peace Prize winners** could not come at a more auspicious time. Nadia Murad and Dr. Denis Mukwege jointly won the award for their campaign to end wartime rape. While this recognition certainly raises awareness about sexual violence as a weapon of war, will it generate the change we hope for?

Nadia Murad is an Iraqi Yazidi survivor of trafficking, sexual and physical abuse, torture and rape by militants of the self-proclaimed Islamic State. Her courageous testimony in front of the UN resulted in a campaign for freeing the Yazidi people. Dr. Denis Mukwege is a Congolese gynecologist who, together with his colleagues, has treated tens of thousands of rape victims at Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, the capital of eastern South Kivu province in the DRC. Both countries are devastated by decades of conflict, as well as dysfunctional and corrupt institutions (Women Under Siege).

In the past few decades, it has become recognized that sexual violence in conflict represents something far more insidious and vicious than random acts of violence perpetrated by individuals: If perpetrated systematically against a civilian population, International Law may recognize rape, trafficking, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, or other forms of sexual violence as war crimes, or crimes against humanity, and in some cases elements of genocide. Yet, wartime rape remains the least condemned war crime, and impunity for perpetrators continues to be the norm (Manjoo & McRaith).

As the case of survivors in the former Yugoslavia illustrates, wartime rape tears at the fabric of communities and societies, for various reasons: Apart from the physical injuries, STDs, HIV/AIDS, forced pregnancy and numerous psychological traumata. Only recently have initiatives been successful in recognizing wartime rape survivors as legitimate victims of conflict, entitled to justice and reparations (UN Women). The number of survivors seeking reparations remains low, faced with a familiar pattern of backlash — when exposing their status as survivors, women face humiliation, stigma and shame from their families, communities and societies (Gottschall).



Moura-Koçoglu

It is doubtful that awarding the Nobel Peace Prize will end the horrifying global scale of sexual violence perpetrated against women and girls during conflict anytime soon. However, the recognition by the Nobel committee underscores the urgency of addressing this crime, and the desperate need for reparative justice. The significance of Ms. Murad's and Dr. Mukwege's courageous efforts lies in the recognition that we, too, have work to do — peace means more than the mere absence of violence and war (Galtung). To address enduring structures and gendered consequences of sexual violence, we need to start listening to, and believing the voices of survivors.

Moura-Koçoglu is an instructor at Florida International University's Center for Women's and Gender Studies. Her primary research focus is Indigenous Feminism as a tool of critical literary analysis within a trans-Indigenous framework. Moura-Koçoglu teaches courses in feminist theory, global gender, global women's writing and women's studies including a course on gender violence which covers wartime rape.

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