

Testimonies of Survivors of Sexual Violence in the UNTV Archive

Dr Jessie Barton Hronešová, University of Oxford

‘It is hard to talk about what we survived and how we survived it with someone. Because when you talk with someone about it, or when someone asks you how it was, and you start telling them the very details and you talk more, they simply cannot believe it, it is simply impossible for them to think that something like that has happened.’ Such is the account of a man attending a weekly therapeutic session at the Medical Centre for Human Rights in Zagreb in 1995 of the lingering psychological scars of the wartime sexual torture he survived. The session is documented in a rare account of sexual violence on males contained in the [United Nation Television \(UNTV\) archive at IWM](#).¹ Without trying to protect the identities of the speakers – a development of a much later time – the video footage in the archive provides rare and raw accounts of survivors and experts dealing with sexual violence. While much has been written about the crimes of sexual violence during the Bosnian war from 1992 to 1995,² the archive documents some early eye-opening accounts about the life of survivors.

Many aspects of this topic have indeed been given ample scholarly attention. The scale of sexual violence in Bosnia in particular (up to 40,000 mostly women but also men), the brutality of sexual torture (infamously including forced sexual acts between family members), the purpose of rape (as part of ethnic cleansing), the role of survivors in breaking the taboo of rape in Bosnia and the path-breaking prosecutions of rape as a crime against humanity at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) have all been well documented and researched.³ First-hand accounts about the victims and witness testimonies from survivors together with extensive journalistic and civil-society reporting during the war have offered a gruesome picture of how

¹ For more about the archive, see Catherine Baker, ‘Peace on the Small Screen: UNPROFOR’s Television Unit in 1994–5 and the ‘Media War’ in Former Yugoslavia’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*, 42 (2021), 1-28.

² Selma Leydesdorff, *Surviving the Bosnian Genocide: The Women of Srebrenica Speak* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Inger Skjelsbaek, *The Political Psychology of War Rape: Studies from Bosnia and Herzegovina* (London/New York: Routledge, 2011); Alexandra Stiglmayer, *Mass Rape: The War against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

³ Janine N. Clark, *Rape, Sexual Violence and Transitional Justice Challenges: Lessons from Bosnia Herzegovina* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017); Elissa Helms, *Innocence and Victimhood: Gender, Nation, and Women’s Activism in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013); Maja Korac, ‘Gender, Conflict and Peace-Building: Lessons from the Conflict in the Former Yugoslavia’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 29 (2006), 510-20; Maria O’Reilly, ‘Peace and Justice Through a Feminist Lens: Gender Justice and The Women’s Court for the Former Yugoslavia’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 10 (2016), 419-45; Teodora Todorova, ‘“Giving Memory a Future”: Confronting the Legacy of Mass Rape in Post-Conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina’, *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, 12 (2013), 3-15; Maria-Adriana Deiana, ‘Gender and Citizenship: Promises of Peace in Post-Dayton Bosnia-Herzegovina’, *Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

sexual and gender-based violence were used as part of a wider strategy to create ethnically homogenous territories.⁴ The footage included in the UNTV archive adds to this body of evidence and provides a rare early insight into how the crimes of sexual violence were perpetrated, documented and processed by the survivors who speak openly and honestly about the scale of their abuse and how they have dealt with it. This brief paper first sketches out how and why Bosnia featured in discussions of wartime sexual violence and then uses the footage from the UNTV archive to illustrate some of the points made.

While it has become a cliché to list all the unique features of the Bosnian war (such as its proximity to Europe, levels of development, its unexpected breakout), the truth of the matter is that foreign journalists had a rare physical access and opportunity to report on a brutal war in close neighbourhood to some European capitals.⁵ Together with local journalists, foreign correspondents and human-rights advocates alerted the world to the widespread use of rape in Croatia and Bosnia that subsequently became anchored in international legal debates as a weapon of war and crime against humanity. A key report published in 1994 by the UN Commissioner M. Cherif Bassiouni estimated that over 20,000 mainly Bosnian Muslim women were systematically raped, tortured and abused.⁶ The report cited 'information indicating that girls as young as seven years old and women as old as 65 have been raped while in captivity'.⁷ Cases of women kept as sexual slaves were particularly gruesome in Eastern Bosnia (Foča, Zvornik and Višegrad) but also in Krajina and the Serb-occupied Grbavica district in Sarajevo. Although it is estimated that up to 3,000 men were victims of various forms of gender-based violence such as genital mutilation, forced nudity and forced sexual acts with other prisoners,⁸ little has been known and reported about these.

The focus on the victimization of women in foreign media and international human rights advocates was later used by domestic political actors to the degree that the war became 'sexualized'.⁹ In 1993, the Bosnian ambassador to the UN Muhamed Sacirbey appealed to the

⁴ Clark, *Rape, Sexual Violence and Transitional Justice Challenges*.

⁵ Tim Allen and Jean Seaton, *The Media of Conflict: War Reporting and Representations of Ethnic Violence* (Zed Books, 1999); Swanee Hunt, *This Was Not Our War: Bosnian Women Reclaiming the Peace* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁶ M. Cherif Bassiouni, *Final Report of the Commission of Experts Established Pursuant to SC Resolution 780 (1992)*, (United Nations, 27 May 1994), pp. 58–59.

⁷ Bassiouni, *Final Report of the Commission of Experts Established Pursuant to SC Resolution 780 (1992)*, p. 55.

⁸ European External Action Service, *EU Member States Annual Meeting on UNSCR 1325: Transitional Justice and Gender: Reducing Impunity*, Brussels: European Union (27 May 2013).

⁹ Janine N. Clark, 'Transitional Justice as Recognition: An Analysis of the Women's Court in Sarajevo', *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 10 (2016), 67–87, p. 77.

General Assembly for intervention. In his speech he pleaded for intervention and lifting of the arms embargo, indirectly implying the case of Kitty Genovese in New York in 1964 that misleadingly came to define the ‘bystander’ effect when the victim suffers and dies on the watch of her neighbours.¹⁰ He noted that Bosnia was being ‘gang raped’ but that ‘the strong avert their eyes’. He concluded by saying that ‘systematic rape has been one of the weapons of this aggression against the Bosnian women in particular’.¹¹ The brutal violation of the female body came to represent the violation of the nation.¹² While the political representation of the violated women suggested they were from rural communities and hapless, women (and men) of all walks of life became victims of the crime. Highly educated women from urban centres such as Sarajevo were targeted too, resulting in some prominent voices narrating the atrocities during the war.¹³ However, the post-war period in Bosnia was marked by re-traditionalisation, return to religious and family values, re-silencing many survivors.¹⁴ The stigma and shame attached to rape for many women and men functioned as an effective silencing mechanism despite some impressive work with survivors by NGOs in the post-Yugoslav sphere.¹⁵ While many came out during the war to speak about their experience, the post-war period became characterised by silence or reluctant testimony from many of the survivors.¹⁶ Organisations such as *Medica Zenica*, *Vive žene*, later *Snaga žene*, and *Women for Women* have worked with survivors to support them with psychosocial services and socioeconomic empowerment. By the late 1990s women who had been violated during the war started with localized activism, calls for justice and campaigns. In 2003, female survivors set up a new organisation for women called *Women-Victims of War* (*Žene-žrtve rata*) that has since been at the forefront of activism about wartime sexual violence. By 2006, survivors of sexual violence in Bosnia were recognised as war victims eligible for full benefits in the larger part of Bosnia (the so-called Federation).¹⁷ By 2018, a similar legislation was

¹⁰ Dale C. Tatum, ‘Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Kitty Genovese of the Balkans’, in *Genocide at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century: Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Darfur*, ed. by Dale C. Tatum (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2010), pp. 59-108. The story of Ms. Genovese was later corrected as her neighbour in fact did come to her help.

¹¹ Cited in: Stjepan Mestrovic, *The Balkanization of the West: The Confluence of Postmodernism and Postcommunism* (London: Routledge, 2004), xi.

¹² Cf. Ruth Seifert, ‘The Second Front: The Logic of Sexual Violence in Wars’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 19 (1996), 35-43.

¹³ Janine N. Clark, ‘A Crime of Identity: Rape and Its Neglected Victims’, *Journal of Human Rights*, 13 (2014) 146-69.

¹⁴ Elissa Helms, ‘“Politics Is a Whore”: Women, Morality and Victimhood in Post-War Bosnia-Herzegovina’, in *The New Bosnian Mosaic: Identities, Memories and Moral Claims in a Post-War Society*, ed. by Xavier Bougarel, Elissa Helms, and Gerlachus Duijzings (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007) pp.235–54.

¹⁵ Cynthia Cockburn and Dubravka Žarkov, *The Postwar Moment: Militaries, Masculinities and International Peacekeeping: Bosnia and the Netherlands* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2002).

¹⁶ Max Bergholz, ‘“As If Nothing Ever Happened”: Massacres, Missing Corpses, and Silence in Bosnian Community’, in *Destruction and Human Remains: Disposal and Concealment in Genocide and Mass Violence*, ed. by Anstett Élisabeth and Dreyfus Jean-Marc (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), pp.15-45.

¹⁷ Helms, *Innocence and Victimhood*, p. 203-4.

adopted in the Bosnian Serb entity. For various technical and personal reasons, though, many women (and men) remain unrecognised and living on the margins. Despite the initial media flurry over the crime, it has taken decades to provide some support for the survivors.

At the backdrop of this development, the UNTV footage exemplifies some of the main issues in dealing with the consequences and portrayal of gender-based torture and sexual violence. There are three particularly illuminating feature vignettes that document the brutality of the crimes that are to some of the speakers 'unimaginable', their afterlife – notably in the documented psychological scars, and the socioeconomic needs of the survivors and their families. The three accounts show that already early on, there had been some notable efforts to support the survivors, which then failed to be replicated and built upon later. Yet they also demonstrate how documenting war crimes and sexual violence, in particular, have changed with the growing evidence of potential re-traumatization and stigmatisation effects that media can have on survivors if their identities are not protected.

The scale of the crimes as well as the potential harm by documenting survivor stories without identity protection are exemplified in video 736A¹⁸ and the reactions it received after its screening on the public Bosnian TV on 17 August 1995. The video provides a live testimony from Tuzla in July 1995 of a female Srebrenica survivor in her teens who had been raped by Bosnian Serb soldiers. Her distress is palpable as the interview was made immediately after the events. The video provides one of the rawest accounts of shock and trauma, but also of the young girl's and her mother's ability and immediate willingness to talk (to a certain degree) about what happened. What is striking about this is the level of detail the survivor provides, including names and times, an important aspect for any criminal prosecution that could follow:

'They came around half past three with a car of UNPROFOR. Three of them came and asked for me. I did not respond so they took another girl, (...). They kept her for about 10 minutes down there and returned her. She then said they were asking for me again. And then a UNPROFOR car came again, but those were not UNPROFOR soldiers but Serbs. They took me down there to the barracks and started hitting me. One put a gun to my head and another a knife to my throat. There they raped me for about 20 minutes,'

¹⁸ UNTV 736A, *Macedonia's Economy*, Film Collection, Imperial War Museum.

She recounted, stopping to take a breath, clearly unable to go on. Her mother then described how the act was done. It also depicts the tragic irony of the nearby presence of journalists and observers who had access to the neighboring localities after the events, reporting about mass rape executions and torture. Indeed, this account shows how rape was an integral part of the events of Srebrenica, which has often been sidelined given the scale of mass executions that ensued. Yet while most attention has been paid to the murder of up to 8,000 mainly Bosniak men that later amassed to genocide at international and domestic courts, rape was equally widespread during the onslaughts on the Srebrenica enclave.¹⁹ While international troops failed to prevent the mass killings, they also proved futile to stop rapes within the UN base, which today often remains forgotten in the ongoing debates about Srebrenica.

Yet from today's perspective, recording such a video and then screening it on public Bosnian TV after prime news as it happened in August 1995 is unthinkable. Even the professional journalistic community has over the past decades become aware of the potential harm to survivors that can be caused by having one's suffering recounted in its rawest form, especially when this is done publicly without changing names and identities.²⁰ All the more so, as questions remain over how informed consent²¹ was integrated in the UNTV's recording of this video. Yet even with a consent, the long-term harm of showing such videos to the public can be extremely harmful. Indeed, the UNTV archive contains a fax addressed to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) from two civil society organisation that have been supporting survivors of sexual violence in Bosnia, *Medica Zenica* and *Vive Žene*, protesting 'strongly against this feature and this abuse of the survivors of torture and violence'.²² Their protest rightly highlights that a survivor in distress is often hardly aware of what is being recorded and to what purpose. As they note 'we assum(e) that this young woman was in that very moment, when she told her story in fron(t) of the camera, was not aware of what it would mean to her to expose the traum(a) she had suffered to the public in such a way. (sic)'²³ They continued by pointing out other women have even committed suicides after giving interviews to foreign media. This recording thus provides both a

¹⁹ Leydesdorff, *Surviving the Bosnian Genocide*; Lara J. Nettelfield and Sarah Wagner, *Srebrenica in the Aftermath of Genocide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

²⁰ Meenakshi Gigi Durham, *MeToo: The Impact of Rape Culture in the Media* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2021).

²¹ That is consent when the interlocutor has been informed about the full range of potential consequences and given time to consider even the unforeseen risks (and benefits).

²² UNTV Archive, Fax, 21 August 1995, *Press Release To Publish the crime – YES, To re-traumatize and abuse the survivor by media – NEVER!*, Medica Zenica, Vive Zene Tuzla to UNHCR. I am grateful to Catherine Baker for providing me with a copy of this fax from the UNTV archive.

²³ The copy of the fax is of poor quality, making it difficult to read.

unique account from the perspective of investigators, as well as a potentially harmful incident from the perspective of the survivor.

In the second analyzed short documentary, 601F (most likely from late 1994/early 1995) a survivor, who now has two children talks about her life during the war in the form of a letter to her pre-war friends in Srebrenica, Žepa, Rogatica, and Goražde :²⁴

‘Are they aware that my life has completely changed on 19 June 1992. I, thinking about everything that has happened – when my father, paraplegic, burnt to death in his house, when they shot dead my husband, when my school friends died, when pregnant women were dying, when they were killing old people – I wonder whether they sleep peacefully my former friends. But so that it is known: I survived.’

She was pregnant when she was raped in Stara Popova Kuća in the Rogatica camp in June 1992. Despite the postwar discourse about women as victims (also exemplified in the name of the organisations set up in 2003 noted above), she recounts her story from the position of an empowered survivor, not a hapless and submissive victim. She specifically notes that her children must grow up to remember what happened to her but also remember that she remained ‘normal’, carry ‘love in themselves’ and not hate anyone. From today’s perspective, her account distorts the media monopoly in Bosnia that presents victims of sexual violence as suffering from the consequences of what happened, traumatized, unable to move on, and paralysed in their life.²⁵ The time of her open account is also notable here: she is most likely speaking during the last year of the war when such stories were widely and often openly discussed. Few years later, such an account would bear stigma, shame and negative consequences to the social position of the individual.

Third, an even more silenced topic that has become a taboo in Bosnia after 1995²⁶ represents video 639 about male detainees in war time camps who were sexually abused.²⁷ The recording not only offers their testimonies and the psychological scars the crime has left, it also shows how a support session in Zagreb was run. Such sessions became rarer soon after the war. The motivation of the speakers to recount their story is so that it is known what happened to them

²⁴ UNT 601F, *Mensudija Video Letter*, Film Collection, Imperial War Museum.

²⁵ Much academic literature cited in this paper has in fact debunked these portrayals.

²⁶ Janine N. Clark, ‘Masculinity and Male Survivors of Wartime Sexual Violence: A Bosnian Case Study’, *Conflict, Security & Development*, 17 (2017a), 287–311.

²⁷ UNT 639, *Men Abused*, Film Collection, Imperial War Museum.

so that it helps others. However, despite the opening during the war – which to some was for pragmatic reasons – the Bosnian postwar closing on the topic resulted in decreasing awareness, empathy and understanding about the topic. While personal reasons (e.g., having a new family), desire for peaceful coexistence, and the wish to move on have played a role in how individuals deal with the trauma of the crime²⁸, the fact of the matter is that the context has not been inviting for male survivors to come out. In my own work, many survivors noted that they have felt emasculated, ashamed that they might be accused of homosexuality, and judged by others when they spoke out. This is also echoed in the expert respondents interviewed in the UNTV recording: ‘In our culture, it is more difficult for men to be raped than for women. ... In the culture in which we live, a helpless man is a lot worse than a helpless woman’, an expert from the Rebro Hospital in Zagreb opined in the recording. The wider role of the military also mattered: it became particularly difficult for veterans to admit to their perceived ‘failure’ to protect themselves.²⁹

The UNTV collection thus provides a set of unique accounts of how survivors cope with sexual violence and recount it. Yet from today’s point of view, they demonstrate a lost opportunity. The early willingness to talk, ability to recount detail and hope for the future that is noticeable in some of the accounts in the archive has been lost over the years since the war. While the videos depict active *survivors* and strong individuals who are coping with the consequences of what happened as best as they can, Bosnia today has predominantly *victims* who often feel bitter, ‘invisible’ and some have been emotionally defeated by the long post-war struggle.³⁰ Due to the wider ‘politics of victimhood’ – that is conflicts over who can make legitimate claims to victimhood, why and how – survivors in Bosnia have waited decades for domestic recognition of their suffering and have faced denial and lack of empathy. The delays have been caused by the ongoing disputes over who suffered and how during the war, growing levels of denial of war crimes by ethnonationalist political entrepreneurs in Republika Srpska, Serbia and Croatia in particular, and by a cumbersome governance structure that makes administrative access to compensation difficult. It has taken 11 years in Bosnia, 15 in Kosovo and 19 in Croatia to even recognise victims of sexual violence in law and grant them some moderate socioeconomic support. In addition to political and administrative hurdles, the prevailing stigmatisation, shame

²⁸ M. Eastmond and J. M. Selimovic, ‘Silence as Possibility in Postwar Everyday Life’, *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 6 (2012), 502–24.

²⁹ Jessie Barton-Hronešová, *The Struggle for Redress: Victim Capital in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) p. 308.

³⁰ Cf. Jessie Hronešová, ‘Might Makes Right: War-Related Payments in Bosnia and Herzegovina’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 10 (2016), 339–60.

and potential re-traumatisation when recounting one's story have also resulted in rather meagre numbers of claimants eligible for the existing support – around 1,000.³¹ Yet the UNTV documentaries offer a glimpse into the pre-war coexistence and life (comparable to documentaries made by Tone Bringa), especially noticeable in video 601F, that offers a rare insight into empathy and understanding that would well serve today's Bosnia (*We Are All Neighbours* 1993; *Returning Home: Revival of a Bosnian Village* 2001).³² Finally, the analysed recordings also document a different media age when there was little consideration for how both the act of recording and the screening of extremely intimate stories could further harm and marginalise the protagonists. The videos that offer a unique glimpse into acute trauma, coping and its then media representation.

³¹ Personal interview with TRIAL and a lawyer supporting victims of sexual violence, Sarajevo, November 2019. See also Sabiha Husić, *"We Are Still Alive": Research on the Long-Term Consequences of War Rape and Coping Strategies of Survivors in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Zenica: Medica Zenica and Medica Mondiale, 2014).

³² *We Are All Neighbours*, Debbie Christie in *Disappearing World* series (Royal Anthropological Institute: 1993); *Returning Home: Revival of a Bosnian Village*, Tone Bringa and Peter Loizos (Royal Anthropological Institute: 2001).