

Researching sexual violence against men in Bosnia-Herzegovina:

Current progress and research gaps

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, scholarly research on conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) has steadily grown. Despite this, gaps remain. Significantly, while there is a strong foundation of research on female victims of CRSV, research on male victims still lags behind. There have been some key interventions more recently that have broadened the understanding of CRSV against men – both for the individual and for wider society and research on this form of violence is steadily developing (see, for example, Schulz 2018; Dolan 2017; Touquet and Gorris 2016; and the 2018 edited volume by Marysia Zalewski, Paula Drumond, Elisabeth Prügl and Maria Stern).

Sexual violence as a systematic method and tool of warfare really came into the international consciousness in the mid-1990s. Images of vulnerable women were projected worldwide and awareness of this gendered form of violence began to grow in the public consciousness. In the Bosnian context, women have been widely recognised as victims of genocidal sexual violence during the 1992 to 1995 war and genocide, while male victims of sexual violence often fall under the category of torture or crimes against humanity. This is despite a large amount of evidence indicating that men were victims of sexual violence in the conflict.

While the relationship between conflict and sexual violence is well-established and a recognised aspect of conflict, the rhetoric surrounding it has largely focused on the dichotomous perspective of the male perpetrator-female victim. Arguably, this reduces men to being the aggressor and excludes them from the concept and prospect of victimhood. While it is indeed true that men comprise the most deaths in conflict due to their actual or perceived military involvement, a significant number of men are victim to sexual violence in the arena of war.

This blog post briefly summarises what we know about sexual violence against men in the Bosnian context and highlights significant knowledge gaps and avenues for potential future research.

2. What do we know about sexual violence against men during genocide in the Bosnian context?

The main sources of data regarding sexual violence against men during the Bosnian genocide relate to the UN-sanctioned International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the investigation teams that were dispatched prior to the establishment of the court. While there are significant challenges in engaging with this data – perhaps most significantly the legal nature of the setting and the stress facing the persons testifying – the thousands of pages of transcripts provide a useful narrative of conflict. [The Final Report of the UN Commission of Experts](#), in which 600 victims of different forms of violence were interviewed, also provides unparalleled documentation of the violence as it was underway.

Expanding on the aforementioned sources and research work conducted in the 1990s, researchers have been able to build towards a typology of sexual violence against men (SVAM) in the Bosnian context. We know, for instance, that sexual violence was widely perpetrated in detention centres during the war and genocide, and that blunt instrument trauma, public humiliation and forced nudity, and castration were widely used methods of sexual violence against men. We also have some understanding of the secondary trauma of sexual violence on men and psychosexual violence – men being forced to watch their family members being raped. It is also known that SVAM was largely perpetrated within a regime of torture in facilities such as prison camps, concentration camps, police stations and detention centres. These facilities were often located in re-appropriated buildings – old schools, gymnasiums, factories,

warehouses, aeroplane hangers – and were often ad-hoc centres that existed only for short periods. It is thus hard to grasp the actual number of centres, detainees and indeed the number of victims of sexual violence and torture within these centres. Following the war, an anonymous study of 6000 concentration camp inmates from the Sarajevo canton found that 80% of the male detainees reported that they had been sexually assaulted – this study demonstrates the staggering numbers of potential male victims (cited in Stemple 2009).

Research on the linkages between sexual violence and torture is also developing and increasingly, researchers are asking pertinent questions regarding the nature of sexual violence and torture – particularly in the legal definitions between sexual violence and torture (see, for example, Gray and Stern’s 2019 article: “Risky dis/entanglements”). These questions are important in the Bosnian context for building towards an understanding of the different forms of violence that were perpetrated and would provide insight into broader issues of torture and sexual violence in detention centres in global conflict situations. However, the impact of sexual violence on the individual and the broader societal implications of SVAM in Bosnia remain under-researched.

3. Transitional mechanisms for male victims of sexual violence

Historically, law in general and international law specifically have reflected a binary narrative of sexual violence and largely reinforced the concept of the female victim-male perpetrator. Scholarship on sexual violence is beginning to buck this trend, however, challenges remain in international jurisprudence. Further, scholarship on male victims of sexual violence in international law is a very underdeveloped research field.

To date, there is no internationally accepted or recognised definition of sexual violence within international law, meaning there is a lack of language through which victims (male or female) can express what happened to them. Often, the abuse of men falls under categories such as ‘torture,’ ‘crimes against humanity,’ or another category of war crime creating a stumbling block for men achieving justice for the crimes perpetrated against them.

At present, and indeed since the end of the wars in the former Yugoslav region, there is very little in the way of a transitional process to aid the recovery of male victims in the aftermath of sexual violence. A key problem is the lack of recognition of the prevalence and impact of the sexual assault of men. While sexual violence against women has received international attention and focus, male victims have been largely overlooked due to a lack of resources, knowledge, and witnesses. Indeed, while the ICTY was praised for addressing sexual violence, their mandate and work still heavily focused on the protection of women and few perpetrators were punished for acts of sexual violence against men. Further, many male victims of sexual violence were excluded from giving full testimony during the trial processes. At both the ICTY and its sister tribunal for Rwanda, despite substantial evidence that sexual violence was committed against men, it was rarely highlighted in trial judgements from the international tribunals or was highlighted but as a form of torture but not *sexual* violence. In part, this is because of the lack of mechanism for reporting male victims of sexual violence. In some cases, male victims simply fall through the gaps of court reporting.

While over the past twenty-five years there have been some developments in this area, gendered experiences of conflict, as they pertain to men and masculinities, have largely gone under-addressed in transitional justice processes. Indeed, while the ICTY took some tentative steps towards a more nuanced understanding of sexual violence, other post conflict transitional processes have primarily ignored male victims of sexual violence in this context and there is little support available for the men who have suffered. Although this blog post focuses on the situation in Bosnia, this is a problem that can be traced in other global conflicts.

4. Where do we go from here? Avenues for future research

The predominant narrative of sexual violence in conflict still centres on female experiences of conflict and the dichotomous framing of men as perpetrators and women as victims. Awareness of and research on conflict-related sexual violence against men is slowly growing. However, in the transitional justice and reconciliation narratives of sexual violence, men are largely absent with little research on male experiences of testifying in courts or how men are approached in post-conflict transitional justice mechanisms. There are a plethora of reasons why this area is under developed, but the crux of the problem is a lack of empirical data and difficulty in accessing sources.

In order to address this gap in knowledge, future research could focus on the experiences of men when giving testimony at international tribunals. Although challenging research, this could help to build towards a more comprehensive understanding of the politics of testifying and the individual experiences of engaging with international criminal justice more broadly. The international community have not adequately recognised that the story does not end once a testimony has been given, and there is currently a chronic lack of post-testimony support available for male or female victims of sexual violence.

An increased level of research and understanding of this issue could ultimately lead to more nuanced support for men who testify and a greater understanding of conflict-related sexual violence against men more broadly.

5. Selected sources and further reading

- Dolan, Chris. 2017. "Hidden Realities: Screening for experiences of violence amongst war-affected South Sudanese refugees in Northern Uganda." *Refugee Law Project Working Paper No. 25*. Kampala.
- Gray, Harriet and Maria Stern. 2019. "Risky dis/entanglements: Torture and sexual violence in conflict." *European Journal of International Relations*.
- Stemple, Lara. 2009. "Male rape and human rights." *Hastings law Review*. 60.
- Touquet, Heleen and Ellen Gorris. 2016. "Out of the shadows? The inclusion of men and boys in conceptualisations of wartime sexual violence." *Reproductive Health Matters*. 24(47).
- Zalewski, Marysia, Paula Drumond, Elisabeth Prügl and Maria Stern (eds.). 2018. *Sexual Violence Against Men in Global Politics* (eds.).