



SOCIAL STATUS, STIGMATIZATION, AND INSTITUTIONAL INVISIBILITY OF SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES RESULTING FROM THE CRIME OF WARTIME RAPE

DRUŠTVENI STATUS, STIGMATIZACIJA I INSTITUCIONALNA NEPREPOZNATLJIVOST JEDNORODITELJSKE PORODICE NASTALE KAO POSLJEDICA ZLOČINA RATNOG SILOVANJA

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ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the issue of sexual violence during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a particular focus on the status and rights of rape victims. It analyzes the causes, consequences, and forms of sexual violence as a weapon of war, and highlights the numerous obstacles victims face in seeking justice and adequate reparations. Special emphasis is placed on the legal framework and institutional response, including domestic legislation, international standards, and the work of non-governmental organizations. Through a multidisciplinary approach, the paper examines the psychological, social, and legal aspects of trauma, as well as the societal stigmatization of surviving women. The aim of the paper is to emphasize the need for a systematic approach in recognizing and protecting the rights of victims of wartime sexual violence and to propose concrete recommendations for improving the legislative and institutional response.

Key words: wartime rape, stigmatization, institutional invisibility.

SAŽETAK

Rad se bavi problematikom seksualnog nasilja tokom rata u Bosni i Hercegovini, s posebnim fokusom na položaj i prava žrtava silovanja. Analiziraju se uzroci, posljedice i oblici seksualnog nasilja kao oružja rata, te se ukazuje na brojne prepreke s kojima se žrtve suočavaju u pokušaju ostvarivanja pravde i adekvatne reparacije. Poseban akcenat stavljen je na pravni okvir i institucionalni odgovor, uključujući domaće zakonodavstvo, međunarodne standarde i rad nevladinih organizacija. Kroz multidisciplinarni pristup, rad razmatra psihološke, socijalne i pravne aspekte trauma, kao i društvenu stigmatizaciju preživjelih žena. Cilj rada je ukazati na potrebu za sistemskim pristupom u priznavanju i zaštiti prava žrtava ratnog seksualnog nasilja, te predložiti konkretne preporuke za unapređenje zakonodavnog i institucionalnog odgovora.

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Ključne riječi: ratno silovanje, stigmatizacija, institucionalna neprepoznatljivost.

INTRODUCTION

The Bosnian-Herzegovinian family represents a social, scientific, and religious category and is an indispensable companion in the development of Bosnian-Herzegovinian society. The family holds an irreplaceable significance within the specific identity of every individual society, including that of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Numerous factors that are generative for the development of Bosnian-Herzegovinian society influence the social status of the family in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Particularly influential are: the multiculturalism of Bosnian-Herzegovinian society, the traditional way of life and its impact on the constitution of the family, wartime and post-war events, as well as contemporary lifestyles which, under the influence of globalization and transitional processes, have been incorporated into Bosnian-Herzegovinian society.

The study of the family within society is primarily the concern of sociology, within which a special discipline, the sociology of the family, has developed. Most sociologists accept Comte's (Auguste Comte) definition of the family as "the basic cell of society," whereby it encompasses a multitude of forms and status positions. The family is the foundation of society in which most biological and social needs of each individual are fulfilled. As Professor Jusuf Žiga states, the family has a key role in preserving the tradition, culture, religion, and identity of both the individual and the community. The family is a primary and universal social group within which the most significant biological, educational, economic, socio-cultural, and other processes take place. Hegel describes the family as "the middle member of the triad state–family–individual" (Hegel, 1820).

Under the influence of social changes and processes, the family changes its structure and roles. The changes occurring in the modern world inevitably affect the family. Topics related to the modern family, its status and role within the social structure, are of particular importance for a proper understanding of social reality. The modern family has its own specific characteristics, one of which is the single-parent family.

Within the structure of single-parent families, different types exist, most often classified based on the causes of their emergence: divorce, the death of one parent, permanent abandonment of the family, but also the crime of wartime rape. While single-parent families that arose as a consequence of divorce or death have already been the subject of significant research, the topic of single-parent families that emerged as a result of wartime rape in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains insufficiently researched.

Therefore, the primary aim of this paper is to scientifically establish and explain the status-related problems faced by single-parent families, that is, women and children who were born as a result of the crime of rape. The topic of single-parent families, that emerged as a consequence of the crime of rape during the aggression against the sovereign and independent Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995), represents one of the gravest and most complex phenomena of the post-war reality. Rape, as an extreme form of gender-based violence, was used in Bosnia and Herzegovina not only as an act of violence against individuals but also as a weapon of war, which is a rare occurrence in the history of humanity. The systematic rapes committed in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the aggression were

planned and widespread, with a clear goal of ethnic cleansing, domination, and the destruction of families, especially Bosniak ones. Rape thus became an instrument of war strategy. Numerous women, mostly Bosniaks, were subjected to sexual violence in organized camps and detention centers throughout the country.

Rape is one of the most brutal forms of sexual violence, leaving deep and lasting psychological, physical, and social consequences. The consequences of rape go beyond individual trauma, affecting the family and the broader social community, especially when children are born from such crimes, becoming living testimonies of the crime of rape.

However, behind legal definitions and verdicts remain indelible consequences; women who survived rape and decided to give birth to children conceived through that crime are faced with numerous problems. These children often grow up without a father, and their mothers, left to fend for themselves, are stigmatized and lack institutional support.

The remainder of this paper will point to the status-related problems of women, children, and single-parent families that emerged as a result of the crime of rape during the aggression against the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995.

The Bosnian-Herzegovinian Family in a World of Change

In order to fundamentally understand the role and significance of the family in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is necessary to establish a theoretical foundation for the specificities of both Bosnian-Herzegovinian society and the Bosnian-Herzegovinian family. “Thus, Bosnian-Herzegovinian society is an autonomous and indigenous socio-historical, cultural-civilizational, and spiritual-ideational entity with a millennial continuity. The essence of its indigenous character lies in its multilateralism, which is realized through three causally-consequential socio-historical specificities: multireligiosity, multiethnicity, and multiculturalism” (Đozić, 2012:40). From the very specificity of Bosnian-Herzegovinian society arises the specificity of the family, and thus also of the single-parent families that emerged as a result of the crime of rape during the 1992–1995 war.

There is a clear, determined connection between Bosnian-Herzegovinian society, the family, and a particular form of the family—namely, the single-parent family that emerged as a result of rape. Every family has its own value system which exists in a causal relationship with the environment in which the family functions. Structural changes in society are first felt within the family; the family is both the first line of defense and the initiator of social change. All of this is again connected to the quality of family life. “Everything that happens in terms of changes to family structure can also affect the qualities of the family as an educational milieu. Family transformation does not relate only to the form of the family but also to its essence” (Pašalić Kreso, 2004:16).

The Bosnian-Herzegovinian family, as previously emphasized, has its own specific features and characteristics, just as Bosnian-Herzegovinian society does. Although the family is a universal social group with recognizable characteristics and functions, it simultaneously carries specificities that arise from the society in which it exists. It is considered important, for a comprehensive understanding of this topic, to examine the relationship between the Bosnian-Herzegovinian family as a primary social group and the single-parent family that

emerged as a result of the crime of rape during the aggression against the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995. The aggression against Bosnian-Herzegovinian society and the state during the years 1992–1995 left lasting consequences on the family. One of the characteristics of the modern Bosnian-Herzegovinian family is precisely single parenthood. In addition to universal traits, the Bosnian-Herzegovinian family also has its own specific characteristics. If we take just one segment—the characteristics and functions of the family from the perspective of the sociology of Bosnian-Herzegovinian society—one can observe the specificities of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian family. These specificities stem precisely from the characteristics of the society itself. It is believed that the relationship between the characteristics of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian family and Bosnian-Herzegovinian society is determined. Namely, Bosnian-Herzegovinian society and, within it, the family, carry a unique social and cultural structure. Without a proper understanding of even one segment of the social structure, it is not possible to speak of a comprehensive determination of the social status of the family.

This specificity is also highlighted by Ivo Banac, who states: “Bosnia and Herzegovina represents a distinct society—a distinct cultural space. The three Bosnian communities have never lived in complete isolation; separate customs and mentalities intermingled in a society different from that of Croatia and Serbia. Precisely because this Bosnia was an integral cultural space with a distinct historical identity, it cannot be compared to Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia was a state, not a society. Bosnia, on the other hand, no matter how weak as a state, represents a true society” (Banac, 1994:184).

The Single-Parent Family as a Result of the Crime of Wartime Rape

Before elaborating on single-parent families that have emerged as a result of the crime of rape, it is necessary to sociologically define the single-parent family. The literature offers various definitional determinations of the single-parent family. Common to all of them is the fact that one parent is missing within these families. A single-parent family—as a term—includes a family with one parent and children. “The definition of a single parent largely depends on what is meant by the word ‘single’. It can mean alone, independent, lonely, left to oneself, unmarried or outside a permanent relationship. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to call such parents ‘solo parents’ rather than ‘single parents’, as is commonly used in our region. Given the very structure of the family, it is more accurate to refer to these families as ‘single-parent families’, which is also more in line with the English term translation” (Šarić, Pećnik, Josipović, 2003:34). In the paper *Sociology of the Family*, author Martin Segalan states that “it is not incorrect to use the feminine gender when describing the category of single-parent families, since in 85% of cases of so-called *one* (sole) parent, it is in fact a woman” (Segalan, 2009:194).

In addition to the basic conceptual definition of single-parent families, “some terms are also used that are narrower in meaning, such as, for example, single parent, solo parent, one parent, parent without a marital partner, parent living alone, and so forth.” (Grozđanić, 2000:169).

Single-parent families that have emerged as a result of the crime of rape are, by the nature of their origin and continued existence, undoubtedly the most specific category of single-parent families. The position of all members of these families is extremely complex and largely depends on social norms, cultural patterns, the legal system, and institutional support. In societies such as that of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has endured the most brutal form of destruction—aggression—this population remained without social protection and solidarity even thirty years after the war. Women—mothers who are victims of rape—were often abandoned by their families, communities, and institutions.

Single-parent families formed as a result of the crime of rape became degraded in multiple ways because they are: victims of war, single mothers, living witnesses of the crime, and at the same time systemically unrecognized.

The aggression against the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the period from 1992 to 1995 caused a multiple increase in the number of single-parent families, primarily as a result of the death of one parent. Data shows that: “In the territory of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the number of single-parent families increased almost thirteenfold compared to the pre-war period. Thus, the number of families without a father rose from 1,535 in 1991 to 15,775 in 1997—an increase of more than 10 times—while the number of families without a mother rose from 697 in 1991 to 1,650 during the war—an increase of about 2.5 times” (Kreso-Pašalić, 2004:23).

These data clearly indicate a large number of single-parent families that arose as a consequence of the war, but they refer only to the Federation of BiH. Furthermore, the number of families without a father is significantly higher than those without a mother, which is expected since the male population was more exposed to direct combat. However, there is a lack of data on single-parent families that emerged as a result of the crime of rape.

In single-parent families formed as a result of the crime of rape, everyday life is further burdened by a sense of “non-belonging,” societal misunderstanding, and institutional silence. Despite all the hardships and specificities, these families remain unrecognized in legal and statistical frameworks, without adequate institutional support. In a sociological sense, these families represent a form of multiple structural violence: gender-based, institutional, and symbolic. Single-parent families created as a consequence of the crime of rape are undoubtedly a feature of post-war Bosnian-Herzegovinian society and family.

The Crime of Wartime Rape in Bosnian-Herzegovinian Society

Rape is a crime and entails criminal liability regardless of the circumstances under which it is committed. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and other institutions have legally qualified rape as a war crime and a crime against humanity. The judgment in the Foča case (Kunarac et al.) represents an important precedent in international law, as sexual violence was recognized as a systematic attack on the civilian population. “The legal regulation and definition of rape differ in most countries of the world. Rape is generally considered to be coercion, forcing, or broadly a sexual act with another person without their clear and voluntary consent. In this context, sexual intercourse does not necessarily mean penetration, as rape is considered to be any type of sexual act (oral, use of an object, vaginal,

anal intercourse, and other sexual acts committed without the victim's consent), in which the perpetrator engaged without determining whether the victim was willingly consenting" (Čengić et al., 2017:16).

Under international law, rape is considered a serious crime. In the classification of crimes, the most severe are crimes against humanity and genocide. Rape is also recognized as a war crime—as clearly stated in the provisions of the Geneva Conventions (especially the Fourth Convention and the Additional Protocols) and the Statute of the International Criminal Court (Article 8, concerning armed conflicts). The Additional Protocol to the Geneva Convention of 1949 (1977) "The Additional Protocol to the Geneva Convention of 1949 was adopted on 8 June 1977 as an agreement of international humanitarian law and has a binding nature. Article 76, paragraph (1) of the Additional Protocol provides that: Women shall be the object of special respect and shall be protected, in particular, against rape, forced prostitution, and any other form of indecent assault" (Citroni, 2017:19).

Rape as a crime against humanity is recognized when it is part of a widespread and systematic attack on the civilian population (Article 7 of the Rome Statute of the ICC). Under special circumstances, when used with the intent of destroying a particular group (ethnic, religious, racial), rape can also be characterized as an act of genocide—under the Genocide Convention of 1948 and relevant judgments.

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) was the first in history to characterize sexual abuse of women, men, and children as a war crime. Particularly significant is the 2001 judgment against Dragoljub Kunarac, Radomir Kovač, and Zoran Vuković—the first conviction for rape as a crime against humanity. It states that: "Rape and other forms of sexual violence were used as instruments of terror, humiliation, and domination over the civilian population."[†] It was established that the rapes were systematic and planned, not isolated acts of individuals, but part of a broader attack on the Bosniak civilian population—that is, rape in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina was recognized as a strategy of warfare.

The sociology of law can provide a particularly in-depth analysis of these legal provisions, but within the sociology of the family, the focus remains on the formal aspects, with the aim of highlighting the gravity of rape as a cause of the emergence of single-parent families.

In short, international law treats rape in war as one of the gravest forms of human rights violations, with long-lasting consequences for victims and their communities. During the aggression against Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992–1995, according to United Nations[‡] estimates, between 20,000 and 50,000 people—women, men, and children—were subjected to sexual violence and rape. The majority of victims were Bosniak women, but men and children were also targeted. "Although the war in BiH ended more than 20 years ago, Bosnian-Herzegovinian society still struggles to speak about one of the worst wartime atrocities—wartime rape. Women who survived wartime rape still suffer not only from severe trauma but also from the stigmatization by a society that avoids publicly acknowledging them and their

[†] International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the case of Kunarac, Kovač, and Vuković (Case No. IT-96-23 & IT-96-23/1), delivered on February 22, 2001.

[‡] UN Commission of Experts (1994) – Document S/1994/674, established by the UN Security Council, documents the systematic use of rape as a weapon of war. Similar assessments have been confirmed in reports by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and UNHCR.

status. Rape, used as a systematic weapon of war from 1992 to 1995, inflicted enormous harm on the Bosnian-Herzegovinian women who were its victims and pushed them to the margins of a society that, even after so many years, continues to force them to live in silence and addresses their needs and problems very narrowly and without compassion” (Durkalić, 2015:38).

The crime of wartime rape is a lifelong trauma for a woman. Despite the silence, systemic misunderstanding, and the pain they carry within them, there are women—mothers—who dare to tell the truth about themselves, which remains recorded as a witness for all time. In the book *I Begged Them to Kill Me* by Irfan Ajanović, numerous testimonies of wartime rape survivors are collected, describing the most gruesome details of the rapes endured by Bosniak women during the aggression against the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992–1995. Below are just some of the testimonies listed in the mentioned book. One survivor stated that around 150 people were placed in a school, most of them women and children, along with a certain number of elderly men. Every day, five to six Serbian soldiers would come and take several women to a hotel. She stated that when they came for her, they drove her to the hotel. “At the hotel, they told me to wash, and then they took me to a dimly lit room where one Chetnik was already waiting—around thirty-five years old, in uniform, tall, dark, armed with an automatic weapon and a pistol. He reeked of alcohol... He ordered me roughly to undress. I cried and begged him not to do it, and he hit me several times in the head with his fists, saying: ‘If you won’t do it yourself, I’ll undress you.’” After regaining consciousness and realizing she had been raped, he repeated everything again. He later returned her to the school, where she found her fourteen-year-old daughter crying and covered in blood. “She told me, sobbing, that she too had been taken to the hotel, where she was raped by three Chetniks. My daughter begged me to kill her” (Ajanović, 1999:373).

Although the women endured the same crime and knew that every time someone was taken it meant the same thing, they mostly remained silent. One noted: “When the women returned from the rape, they all cried heavily and didn’t speak to anyone. We all cried when the Chetniks took women away. We never knew who would be next. We never talked among ourselves about our suffering.” Every abduction meant trauma for those who remained. The camps were full of children. “When women were taken away, their children had to stay with other women. They cried and screamed. It was hard to calm them down. As if the children knew what was happening to their mothers” (Ajanović, 1999:190).

Most rapes were mass, gang rapes, repeated multiple times on the same victims. “There were cases where five to ten women were raped together, in the same room. Later, some women were killed. Some had their veins cut and were left to bleed out until they died” (Ajanović, 1999:193).

The goal of rape was the complete dehumanization of the victim. The plan was not only to rape women but also to have them bear children from the rape. One survivor in Foča stated: “There were Bosniak women who became pregnant after being raped and were kept by the Chetniks to work for them until they gave birth. They did not allow the women to have abortions; they kept them until the end of the pregnancy to give birth” (Ajanović, 1999:194).

Women rape survivors who decided to carry their pregnancies to term, regardless of whether they remained with the newborn or not, face a particularly difficult social status. They are

confronted with multiple marginalizations and intense structural pressure. Often, social condemnation is directed at the rape victim, not the perpetrator. Such women, in addition to the pain and suffering they endured as victims of rape, are also excluded from family and social activities. According to a study conducted by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), two-thirds of women in BiH stated that they were subjected to condemnation, insults, and humiliation from family and community members. What all victims interviewed by Amnesty International had in common was the feeling that they were somehow responsible for what happened to them, and that they were to blame for the crimes. Many victims found it harder to cope with insults and repeated trauma than with the sexual violence they had endured. However, not enough has been done to eliminate this stigmatization and the patriarchal attitude that holds women responsible for their rape, which is present throughout BiH, especially in rural areas where most victims live” (Benenson House, 2017). If they decided to give birth to a child conceived by rape, that act is often perceived as “morally unacceptable,” and the child is called derogatory names, resulting in the labeling of both mother and child. Nevertheless, there are women who, despite everything, decided to keep their children and live with them, showing strength and love stronger than the violence inflicted upon them. In his work *The Art of Loving*, Fromm considers maternal love to be “the highest form of love.” In the case of rape, when a raped woman becomes a mother, under terrible circumstances, forced, sacrificed, and exploited—this exalted role of the mother, in most cases, overcame all the horror and crime she had endured.

Bosnian-Herzegovinian society has retained elements of the traditional value system, especially in the domain of family relationships. In communities where the traditional family model is dominant, women victims of rape and children born of rape crimes are often subjected to constant discrimination and silent social isolation. “Mirsada Tursunović, who was raped in a camp during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, speaks about how it took 17 years to overcome the fear of social judgment and testify against her attacker” (Husarić, 2021). Institutional insensitivity further exacerbates their situation. Until 2023, in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, women victims of wartime rape could obtain the status of civilian war victims only under strict conditions and by fulfilling rigid procedural requirements. Particularly problematic was the requirement of mandatory expert examination at the Institute for Medical Expertise, which represented an additional trauma—reliving the crime in front of a commission, and more than once.

The Rights of Children Born as a Result of the Crime of Wartime Rape in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Until 2023, the rights of children born as a result of rape crimes were not recognized in the legislation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Their problems can be divided into two categories: administrative and systemic. Children from these families often face bureaucratic obstacles and a lack of understanding. One example is filling out the field “name of one parent”—most forms imply the name of the father, and the proof required is a marriage certificate or a declaration from the father. In the case of children born of rape, mothers were forced to enter only a dash in this field—leading to these children being symbolically referred to as “dash

children." There is no law regulating this situation, which means that whenever they fill out personal documents, the children and their mothers face uncomfortable questions, additional documentation, and administrative complications.

This problem was especially significant for minors, as leaving the country requires the consent of both parents or proof of the other parent's death. The issue was also addressed in the film *Grbavica*[§] by director Jasmila Žbanić, which contributed to a broader societal understanding of the problems faced by this population.

Children born of rape are often exposed to judgment, isolation, and stigmatization throughout their upbringing. According to the association Forgotten Children of War, it is estimated that approximately 4,000 to 5,000 children were born as a result of wartime rape in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is important for society to provide responses to the needs of these children. The impact of a raped mother's psychological condition on her children is well-documented in history. "Children of Holocaust survivors who actually sought therapeutic help usually suffered from depression, apathy, and feelings of guilt. Parent-child relationships in survivor families were often described as emotionally cold, yet simultaneously overly protective" (Husić, 2014:36).

The Bosnian-Herzegovinian public was recently introduced to the book *I Am Alen*, an autobiographical account by a child born as a result of rape. His mother wanted an abortion, but it was too late—the pregnancy was advanced, and she had to give birth to the child, later stating that she had wanted to strangle him.

Alen Muhić (32), a young man born in 1993 in Goražde to a Bosniak mother who had been raped by a Serbian soldier, wrote the autobiographical book *I Am Alen*. In the book, he shares his heartbreaking life story—how he found both his mother and father and confronted the truth about his origins.

Alen describes himself: "I was born as a child of wartime rape. My mother left me in the hospital. I was fed crumbs of biscuits. The janitor adopted me. I survived the label 'Chetnik bastard.' A film was made about me. I found my mother, and my father too." (Slobodna Dalmacija, 2025). Alen and the film *Grbavica* are just some of the stories that have been told—there are countless cases of children born as a result of the crime of rape during the aggression against the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995 that will never be told and will remain invisible, just as many children and mothers have remained invisible in their pain and suffering.

With the adoption of the Law on the Protection of Civilian Victims of War of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, passed on July 31, 2023, for the first time a comprehensive legal framework was established for the status and rights of civilian war victims—including women victims of rape and children born of rape crimes. Key changes include:

[§] Due to scarce resources in its home country of Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Grbavica* was created as a fortunate Bosnian-Austrian-German-Croatian co-production. At the Berlinale, where it premiered, the film won the Grand Prix for Best Film, the Peace Film Award, and recognition from the Ecumenical Jury. The director and screenwriter stated that she intended to use this film to scratch the surface of everyday life, and within that in-between space where a whole range of human emotions lies hidden, create a story about love, victims, and truth. This difficult and delicate topic—the consequences of wartime rape—had intrigued her ever since, as a seventeen-year-old, she met girls her own age who had been raped and deported from Eastern Bosnia to attend her primary school.

1. Abolishment of mandatory forensic examination – replaced by a professional opinion of the Commission for the Identification of Victims of Sexual Violence.
2. Elimination of the application deadline – status can be requested at any point in life.
3. Recognition of children born after the crime of rape as civilian war victims – Bosnia and Herzegovina is the first country in the world to legally recognize this. Rights include disability benefits, health and educational protection, employment rights, psychological and legal assistance.

The law was published in the *Official Gazette of the Federation of BiH*, no. 60/23, and came into effect on January 1, 2024. However, challenges remain in its implementation—for example, the requirement that the mother must already have recognized victim status, and the need for consistent application in practice.

In sociological terms, single-parent families formed as a result of rape crimes represent a specific social group. They are symbols of both suffering and resistance, but without public recognition and institutional support—they remain silent witnesses.

CONCLUSION

Single-parent families formed as a result of wartime rape during the aggression against the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina represent one of the most sensitive and most stigmatized social groups in post-war Bosnian society. This category of single-parent families, where the mothers—survivors of sexual violence—most often raise children, conceived through the crime of rape, on their own, bears a multiple burden: personal trauma, social condemnation, legal and institutional invisibility, and socioeconomic insecurity. Their children, born of rape, face issues of identity, rejection, and stigmatization. This topic still remains largely unspoken. Although there are documented cases of women and children born of wartime rape, their legal status was only recently—nearly three decades after the war—formally recognized as civilian victims of war.

From a sociological perspective, these families face numerous status-related challenges that further marginalize them: an underdeveloped institutional protection framework, lack of communication, societal stigmatization, and inconsistent legal rights across the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Certain steps forward have been made, including the formal recognition of the status of civilian victims of war in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina; however, this is not sufficient to ensure the full social, legal, and psychological support that is urgently needed.

This topic must not remain at the margins of academic, political, and social interest. A more comprehensive scientific analysis is needed, as well as a concrete institutional response that includes the development of specific social policies, support programs for women, children, and families who are victims of rape crimes. Such measures would mitigate the consequences of rape as a war crime and help build a more compassionate society—one that does not forget its most vulnerable members.

It is therefore essential that Bosnian society, the academic community, and both governmental and non-governmental institutions approach this issue systematically, through legal reforms, targeted support programs, and public recognition, so that these families can finally receive

the dignity, protection, and rightful place they deserve in the collective memory and conscience of Bosnian society.

Non-governmental organizations such as Medica Zenica and Snaga Žene Tuzla have provided valuable support to women victims of sexual violence, but their activities are time-limited and project-based. The state, on the other hand, fails to adopt a systemic approach. The healthcare, education, and social welfare systems still do not recognize the specific needs of these families, nor are there standardized protocols for working with children born of rape.

I hope this paper will encourage further research, all in the service of fostering better understanding and providing much-needed assistance to the victims of rape crimes.

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