

# Working with survivors of war rape and sexual violence

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## **Working with Survivors of War Rape and Sexual Violence: Fieldwork Reflections from Bosnia-Herzegovina**

### **Introduction**

S was raped in a camp in Zvornik municipality, in the northeast of Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH). Today, she lives in a small apartment in the city of Tuzla and has numerous health problems. Opening a cupboard in her lounge, she pulled out several small plastic bags containing packets of tablets and pills. After calling the bank, she became agitated; the social payment that she receives each month, as a rape survivor, was 12 days late. How was she going to pay her bills? She took a Fluoxetine tablet to calm her nerves (author interview, 27 August 2014).

Twenty-one years after the Bosnian war ended, women like S continue to suffer. Their once-coveted stories, however, no longer attract the same interest. The result is a dearth of scholarship on the long-term consequences of the mass rapes and sexual violence committed during the conflict (Medica Zenica and Medica Mondiale 2014: 15-16). In 2014, I commenced a research project – funded by the Leverhulme Trust – that sought to address this gap. In just over 12 months, I interviewed 79 male and female survivors of these crimes, to explore how their war trauma continues to impact on their lives today. It was the most challenging fieldwork that I have completed to date, but also the most rewarding. As Tompkins (1995: 852) underlines, ‘Rape, like genocide, will not be deterred unless and until the stories are heard’. My principal objective was to provide survivors with a safe space in which to share their stories.

I left BiH in October 2015. As Stebbins (1991) asks, however, do we ever truly leave the field, particularly after undertaking an extended period of fieldwork that involves highly sensitive research? Since returning to the UK, I have increasingly reflected on some of the challenges that I faced in BiH, and this article is precisely about those challenges. More specifically, it is about the oft-neglected *experiential* dimensions of research. The article's central argument is that as academics and researchers, we should not only present and analyze our data from the field. We should also write about our personal *experiences*.

Notwithstanding Finlay's (2002: 12) warning that 'the process of engaging in reflexivity is perilous, full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails', reflexivity serves two key purposes in this paper. Firstly, by writing about my own experiences in the field and the challenges that I faced, I hope to benefit other field researchers. Universities offer courses on, for example, qualitative methods and interviewing skills, thereby teaching us the 'nuts and bolts' of how to do research. Yet, they cannot fully prepare us for the realities of undertaking fieldwork. Quintessentially, fieldwork involves learning through doing (King 2009: 8) – and we can significantly learn from each other's experiences.

Secondly, university ethics committees require us to explain how we will protect our interviewees and our research data. Rarely do they ask us how we will protect *ourselves* from harm, and in particular emotional harm (Hubbard, Backett-Mulburn and Kemmer 2001: 120; Dickson-Swift et al. 2007: 345). Part of this article accordingly addresses some of the personal challenges that I faced during my time in BiH, to underscore that issues of responsibility involved in fieldwork extend beyond the relationship between researcher and interviewee.

The article's first section is contextual; it provides background information on the use of rape and sexual violence during the Bosnian war. It also discusses research methodology. The second section focuses on some of the practical difficulties that I encountered in the field. The third section addresses ethical issues, and the final section deals with some of the personal challenges that I faced in BiH. Throughout the article, I will use the more empowering term 'survivors' rather than 'victims'.

## **1. Research Context and Methodology**

BiH was one of the six republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Slovenia and Croatia declared independence in June 1991, and BiH did the same on 3 March 1992, following a referendum on the issue. Bosnian Serbs, however, who constituted 33 per cent of the population, boycotted the referendum. Their leaders were implacably opposed to independence, wanting BiH to remain part of a rump **or truncated Yugoslavia (made up of Serbia and Montenegro)**. The irreconcilable goals of the Bosnian Muslim and Bosnian Serb leaderships plunged the country into war, and during the next three years over 100,000 people were killed (Džidić 2013).

A particular feature of the conflict that attracted significant international attention was the pervasive use of rape and sexual violence. In 1992, the United Nations (UN) established an Expert Commission to investigate human rights violations occurring in the former Yugoslavia, and particularly in BiH. Finding evidence of 'a very high number of rapes and sexual assaults', the Commission concluded that 'the earlier projection of 20,000 rapes made by other sources is not unreasonable...' (UN Security Council 1994: §87, Notes section). Many of the rapes and sexual abuses in BiH occurred in camps and other places of detention. In the recent judgement of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia

(ICTY) against Radovan Karadžić, the former Bosnian Serb leader, the Trial Chamber painted a powerful picture of daily life inside a Serb-run detention centre in Rogatica in eastern BiH. It described how, at night, ‘...soldiers would bang on the walls and open the doors violently, flash their flashlights onto the faces of detainees, choose women and girls at random, say they were being taken for questioning but they would take them away to be raped’ (Prosecutor v. Karadžić 2016: §990).

The widespread use of camps, and the seemingly organized way in which many of the abuses were committed, led the aforementioned Commission of Experts to conclude that rape and sexual violence strongly appeared to be ‘the product of a [Serb] policy’ (UN Security Council 1994: §313). While there is no hard evidence that such a policy existed, discourse and scholarship on the use of rape in the Bosnian war have overwhelmingly focused on Serb perpetrators and Bosniak (female) victims. Serb and Croat experiences of rape, as well as male experiences of sexual violence, have been heavily marginalized.<sup>1</sup> One of my research priorities was thus to generate an interview sample that reflected the **complexities and nuances of victimhood**.

During a scoping visit to BiH in August 2014, and an extended period of fieldwork between October 2014 and September 2015, I interviewed 79 survivors of rape and sexual violence.<sup>2</sup> Information about the interviewees is contained in Table 1. Although I was based in the city of Tuzla, I travelled to over 20 different locations across BiH. Interviews typically lasted between two and four hours and I conducted all of them in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian. I recorded the interviews whenever possible. Otherwise, I made comprehensive notes both during and immediately after the interviews.

Table 1.

| Sex          | Age             | Ethnicity       | Place of birth       | Place where raped/sexually abused |
|--------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Women:<br>66 | Under 40:<br>11 | Bosniak:<br>57  | Sarajevo:<br>4       | Camp:<br>40                       |
| Men:<br>13   | 40s:<br>18      | Serb:<br>15     | Central BiH:<br>16   | Other:<br>39                      |
|              | 50s:<br>34      | Croat:<br>6     | Northeast BiH:<br>15 |                                   |
|              | Over 60:<br>16  | Macedonia:<br>1 | Brčko District:<br>8 |                                   |
|              |                 |                 | Posavina:<br>5       |                                   |
|              |                 |                 | Eastern BiH:<br>6    |                                   |
|              |                 |                 | Hercegovina:<br>12   |                                   |
|              |                 |                 | Northwest BiH:<br>12 |                                   |
|              |                 |                 | Other:<br>1          |                                   |

## 2. Practical Challenges in the Field

### *The challenges of gaining access*

It has been 21 years since the Bosnian war ended and many survivors have recounted their stories multiple times, giving interviews to researchers, journalists or film crews. Some have also spoken to police and prosecutors. The result is that a deeply-entrenched ‘research fatigue’ has set in (Clark 2008: 955). People are tired of telling their stories and, increasingly, they see no reason for doing so. Over the years, too many empty promises have been made,<sup>3</sup> leaving survivors feeling misused. Compounding the problem is the fact that many of them continue to face a myriad of problems – from poverty and health issues to domestic violence and social marginalization (see Medica Zenica and Medica Mondiale 2014) – and have gained nothing from speaking about the past. An interviewee in central BiH, for example, described how she allowed a journalist to write a book about her and her war story. Once the

journalist returned home, she never contacted the interviewee again (author interview, 12 November 2014).

Not only is such misuse of survivors deeply unethical, but it has made it even harder for researchers to now reach out to these men and women. Survivors frequently assumed that I would financially profit from interviewing them, and some of them insisted that they would only speak to me if I paid them. A survivor from Foča in eastern BiH, moreover, offered to speak to me only on the condition that I paid for her to go to a spa. While part of me found such ‘bargaining’ distasteful, it was also entirely understandable that individuals who had previously been taken advantage of now wanted something in return for their stories, particularly in a stagnant economy.<sup>4</sup> I did not pay interviewees for their stories, but I did pay their travel expenses when this was necessary (although I almost always travelled to meet interviewees). I also bought small gifts when I visited them in their homes. According to Head (2009: 335-336), ‘It is difficult to assess whether the use of payments in qualitative social research is becoming increasingly frequent or not as details of payments may not be included in publications or may only be briefly referred to in an appendix’. Certainly, the issue of paying interviewees should be more openly discussed; and within the UK, more guidance from the research councils would be welcome.<sup>5</sup>

Although survivors have become wary of researchers, and particularly of ‘*stranci*’ (foreigners), there was also a strong sense among many of the individuals whom I met that they had been forgotten. They felt that nobody cared about them, including their own State.<sup>6</sup> In undertaking a research project on the long-term consequences of war rape and sexual violence in BiH, one of my major objectives was precisely to ensure that the survivors of these crimes are not forgotten or overlooked. That these men and women continue to face a

multitude of challenges and problems has fundamental implications for transitional justice, ‘the set of judicial and non-judicial measures that have been implemented by different countries in order to redress the legacies of massive human rights abuses’ (International Centre for Transitional Justice n.d.). The ultimate aim of the project, thus, was (and is) to expand the existing parameters of transitional justice by raising new awareness of the long-term needs of survivors.

I communicated these research goals to all interviewees and gave them examples of the sorts of questions that I would be asking. These included questions about their relationships (in particular with spouses and children), whether or not they had testified against their abuser/s and the continuing impact of their war trauma. Ultimately, many of the individuals who took part in this research agreed to share their stories with me because they saw a value in disseminating the truth and supported the aims of the research. For some of the survivors whom I approached, however, **these intangibles were not sufficiently compelling.**

I located interviewees in three ways. Firstly, I worked with a superb non-governmental organization (NGO) called *Snaga Źene*.<sup>7</sup> The NGO, based in Tuzla, aims to rehabilitate trauma victims through occupational therapy, and its main focus is on women (from all ethnic groups) who experienced rape and sexual violence during the Bosnian war. My collaboration with *Snaga Źene* thus provided invaluable opportunities to gain access to survivors.

Secondly, I frequently used snowball sampling, asking interviewees if they could put me in contact with other potential interviewees. To cite Browne (2005: 47), ‘Snowball sampling is often used because the population under investigation is “hidden” either due to low numbers of potential participants or the sensitivity of the topic’. An interviewee in Trebinje arranged



for me to interview a further three survivors in the town, as well as a survivor in Višegrad. Similarly, an interviewee in Tuzla provided me with the telephone numbers of two survivors in Vareš and Modriča respectively.

Thirdly, I contacted various women's NGOs, victims' associations and camp survivors' organizations throughout BiH. Many of them were extremely helpful and made it possible for me to establish contact with survivors. In some cases, however, these 'gatekeepers' were uncooperative. In October 2014, for example, I called an organization in eastern BiH. I was told very bluntly by an employee that they would not allow me to re-traumatize 'their' women. When I subsequently met the director of the NGO at an event in Sarajevo, she made it clear – without knowing anything about me – that she was fundamentally opposed to my research. On another occasion, I contacted the head of a victims' association in Republika Srpska (RS), to ask whether I could speak to her and perhaps one or two of her members. She maintained that neither she nor any of the women in her association would speak to me unless I was willing to pay them because they had been misused too many times in the past.

Gaining access to vulnerable individuals is necessarily a process. In their research on battered women, for example, Sullivan and Cain (2009: 613) note that 'Before a domestic violence program will agree to approach survivors about participating in scientific studies, staff will need to firmly believe that the research will not be detrimental to survivors individually or collectively'. Unfortunately, during my fieldwork in BiH, certain organizations automatically assumed that my research *would* be detrimental. The responses that I received from some of them were a natural and understandable reaction to their previous negative experiences with researchers. The fact, however, that I strongly believed in my research and in why I was doing it meant that I found it difficult to deal with individuals who were quick to make

negative assumptions about me. I frequently felt under attack. Gatekeepers do have ‘a vital role to play as a “safety barrier” to filter out any research which is inappropriate or unsafe’ (McCarry 2005: 95; see also Madlingozi 2010: 224). Nevertheless, this ‘filtering’ role should not be exercised in a way that robs those being ‘protected’ of their **agency**<sup>8</sup> and voice.

The persistence of rape stigma (Bidey 2014) also made it difficult to find survivors who were willing to tell their stories. This stigma, which is not unique to the Balkans (Dartnall and Jewkes 2013: 3-4), has contributed to a ‘culture of silence’ in BiH. Some survivors have never spoken about their experiences, due to a sense of shame; and female survivors were often afraid of their husbands – and especially their children – finding out what had happened to them during the war. A survivor in northeast BiH agreed to talk, but she abruptly ended the interview as soon as her husband and son arrived home, telling them that I was there to ask her about the floods that had badly affected this part of BiH in May 2014. **Many survivors have thus internalized a gatekeeper role. They are denying access to their stories in order to shield their families from the truth, and to shield themselves from the negative reactions that they fear from their loved-ones.**

#### *The challenges of locating specific groups of survivors*

The overwhelming focus on the use of rape and sexual violence against women during the Bosnian war has meant that we have too often overlooked the fact that men were also subjected to these crimes (Karabegović 2010). It was therefore important for me to speak to some of these male survivors, and this presented its own challenges. Although there are no men’s NGOs in BiH, there are numerous veterans’ and camp survivors’ associations. Yet, in these very ‘masculine’ environments, it can be difficult to broach the delicate issue of rape

and sexual violence against men. The biggest challenge was thus to establish contact with male survivors. Once I had done so, however, they were often very ready to speak.

One reason for this is that the men did not have the same family-related concerns as many of the women whom I approached; their wives already knew what had happened to them during the war. A second reason is that because male survivors in BiH have often been overlooked, the men rarely exhibited research fatigue. They agreed to be interviewed because they wanted people to know what had happened to them. An interviewee in northeast BiH stressed that he will always share his story because the truth is critical for countering denial (author interview, 23 August 2014). With the help of camp survivor organizations in Sarajevo, Trebinje and Velika Kladuša, I was ultimately able to interview 13 male survivors (see Author 2016).

A further challenge that I faced was finding interviewees from all ethnic groups. The aforementioned Commission of Experts found that ‘...the largest number of reported victims have been Bosnian Muslims, and the largest number of alleged perpetrators have been Bosnian Serbs’ (United Nations 1994: §251). Even though Serb soldiers carried out the largest number of rapes, it is important to underline that there were perpetrators and victims on all sides.<sup>9</sup> The dominant focus on the rapes of Bosniak women, however (see, for example, MacKinnon 1994; Stiglmayer 1994; Allen 1996; Helms 2014), has marginalized the experiences of Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats. This was one of the reasons why it proved so difficult to gain access to these survivors. Ignored for so long, they are often extremely reluctant to speak out, afraid that their stories will not be believed.

The main associations and NGOs in BiH that work with rape survivors are based in the Federation, are predominantly run by Bosniaks and primarily focus on Bosniak women. Furthermore, there is significant political weight behind some of these NGOs. In contrast, it is far less clear who is fighting for Serb and Croat survivors. This also created significant access challenges as it was difficult to know whom to approach; and when I did approach relevant individuals, the outcome was often unsuccessful. The president of a camp survivors' association in central BiH, for example, unhelpfully insisted that the shame and stigma of being raped are so great for Bosnian Croat women that they will not speak out. Yet, shame and stigma are not unique to Croat survivors, and some of them have told their stories. *Snaga Žene*, for example, is working with a group of Bosnian Croat survivors in western Hercegovina, and I was able to interview six Croat women. Admittedly, this was a far smaller number than I had hoped for. **Similarly, I would have welcomed the opportunity to speak to more Bosnian Serb survivors, particularly given how little is known about their experiences (Author 2016).** The ethnic composition of the interview sample, however, reflects the enormous challenges inherent in undertaking this type of research – and in reaching out to particular groups of survivors who have hitherto been ignored.

### **3. Ethical Challenges in the Field**

Maslow's (1966: 45) observation that '[t]here is no substitute for experience, none at all' has particular resonance in the context of working with survivors of rape and sexual violence. When I started my fieldwork, I had no real experience in this regard and often 'tiptoed' my way through interviews. I avoided asking interviewees anything about the war, in order not to distress them, and I focused on the present. Did they have civilian victim of war status;<sup>10</sup> what help had they received; did they have any health issues? This meant, however, that the data I was generating was highly decontextualized; it is almost impossible to fully understand

survivors' current problems and needs without knowing something about their war experiences. The challenge, therefore, was to create a space for interviewees to speak about the past in a way that they felt comfortable with.

This challenge, moreover, varied from survivor to survivor. Some, and particularly those who had undergone therapy and counselling, gave quite detailed accounts of their experiences. In a village in central BiH, for example, I interviewed a Bosniak woman in her bedroom, the only place in the house where we could speak in private. While this was slightly unorthodox, it helped to create a very informal atmosphere, and the interviewee spoke at length about her time imprisoned in a local school and about the events leading up to the rape (author interview, 5 February 2015). Another interviewee, in Tuzla, began telling her story almost as soon as I walked through her front door. Raped in her flat in a town in eastern BiH, she talked about the abuse and mistreatment that she suffered over a period of several days. She also wanted me to see the scars under her breasts; her torturers had extinguished their cigarette stubs on her skin (author interview, 26 October 2014). For his part, a male interviewee living in Hercegovina struggled to speak about what he had endured in the Lora camp in Split, in Croatia, but he wanted me to read the statement that he had given to Bosnian police (author interview, 23 April 2015).

Some interviewees, in contrast, talked only briefly about the war, and a small number largely avoided it altogether. As Mertus (2004: 120) points out, 'Some survivors are unable initially to speak about certain painful incidents; other survivors skip facts that appear irrelevant; and others remember differently over time'. Fundamentally, every survivor is an individual, and it is essential to respect the fact that all of these men and women have their own personal boundaries and ways of remembering/coping with their trauma. I typically began each

interview by inviting interviewees to briefly tell me their story. This gave them the scope to share with me as much or as little as they wanted. I also generally asked few questions, in order to create a free-flowing conversation that allowed interviewees to talk about what was most important to them.

One of the key prerequisites for a successful interview is trust, and trust-building is an integral part of the interview process (Dickson-Swift et al. 2007: 331). Trust developed very naturally in some cases, particularly when interviewees were of a similar age to me. Some of the older female interviewees, for their part, were maternal towards me, and this also helped to create trust. An interviewee in eastern BiH, for example, was concerned that my feet would get cold on the way back to the hotel and insisted on giving me two pairs of thick woollen socks that she had made; and an interviewee in east Sarajevo, despite living in extremely poor conditions in a small room, was adamant that she wanted to cook for me.

How we, as researchers, make an interviewee feel, and the questions that we ask, have a crucial impact on trust-building. It is essential to put interviewees at ease, and I sought to do this by keeping the situation as relaxed and informal as possible, and by using the terminology of ‘conversation’ rather than ‘interview’. Inherent in a conversation is the notion of reciprocity, and I wanted interviewees to feel that they could also ask me questions. They were often curious, for example, to know whether I am married, whether I have children and how I learnt to speak their language. As Watts (2008: 7) notes, ‘...rapport is mutually constructed between those who can empathise with each other and is developed through a willingness of each to look into the world of the other’.

Nevertheless, there were moments during my fieldwork, particularly when interviewees became upset or when I felt emotionally exhausted, that I questioned the ethics of what I was doing. Was I re-traumatizing these men and women? Was I re-awakening painful memories? These were questions that I struggled with. As Corbin and Morse (2003: 337) point out, however, 'To make the assumption that all interviews are potentially harmful takes away participant agency and control over what is said, how it is said, or if anything is said at all about a topic'. While many survivors whom I approached did not want to speak to me and/or felt unable to do so, those who did agree to talk to me gave informed consent and were free to stop the interview at any time, although none of them did so. When they cried, they typically took a minute or two to compose themselves and then carried on. They wanted to continue.

According to Marijana Senjak, a psychologist-psychotherapist with years of experience of working with survivors of war rape and sexual violence in BiH and Croatia, it is not a bad thing when interviewees cry. In her words, 'They need to touch the feelings that they had when the trauma happened. When they touch those feelings again, they gain control of them, and this is an important part of the healing process' (author interview, 29 August 2015). Indeed, interviewees who became upset frequently disclosed, often as I was leaving, that it had helped them to talk. This lends support to the argument that 'Although some individuals report feeling distressed during or immediately following trauma-research participation, the negative emotional reactions experienced by participants appear to be fleeting' (Legerski and Bunnell 2010: 434).

It would be highly irresponsible and unethical, however, to leave an interviewee when s/he is upset. Hence, I always stayed with interviewees for as long as I felt was necessary and for as long as they wanted to talk. The interview itself would usually come to a natural end and

when I interviewed survivors in their own homes, they often wanted to share with me more positive parts of their life. An interviewee in Prijedor municipality, for example, showed me the craft work that she does in her spare time; and an interviewee in Vitez municipality took me outside to see her garden and vegetable plot. Some interviewees were in particular need of help and, with their consent, I always put them in contact with relevant NGOs in BiH. In November 2014, for example, I travelled to Vareš and a nearby mountain village to speak to four survivors. A month later, I returned with the head of *Snaga Žene*, in order to introduce her to these women. The NGO now makes regular visits to Vareš, and, consistent with its occupational therapy-based approach to rehabilitating survivors, it has provided the women with agricultural equipment, *plastenici* (a type of greenhouse), lavender and seeds. *Snaga Žene* has also purchased *plastenici* for a group of male survivors whom I first visited in August 2014 in a village near Zvornik.

#### **4. Personal Challenges in the Field**

According to Dickson-Swift et al. (2007: 328), ‘Researchers undertaking qualitative research, and particularly qualitative research on sensitive topics, need to be able to make an assessment of the impact of the research on both the participants *and* themselves’. Very rarely, however, do we hear about how fieldwork affects researchers,<sup>11</sup> and this is an important gap within social science literature that needs to be filled. We have a responsibility to write about these experiences and to share them.

One of the biggest personal challenges that I faced in the field was dealing with my emotions. Ely et al. (1991: 49) underline that ‘[i]f we undertake to study human lives, we have to be ready to face human feelings’. Early in my research, the predominant emotion that I felt was anger. I was working with men and women who had been subjected to brutal and degrading



human rights violations; some interviewees had been in their teens when they were sexually violated; and some female interviewees were now being verbally and/or physically abused by their husbands. All of this aroused in me a deep sense of anger and injustice, feelings exacerbated by the fact that there is little help and support available to survivors in BiH. NGOs like *Snaga Źene*, *Viva Źene* and *Medica Zenica* are doing wonderful work, but they have limited resources and cannot reach everyone – or every part of the country. What interviewees repeatedly argued is that the State has failed them and should be doing more.

One of my most difficult interviews was with a survivor in north-west BiH who had recently had a brain tumour. She was wearing a wig and her face was partially paralyzed as a result of the operation that she had undergone to remove the tumour. Although she had civilian victim of war status, the sum of 580 Bosnian Marks (approximately £192) that she was receiving each month was not enough to support her and her family. She could not afford to buy all of the medicines that she needed (author interview, 4 December 2014).<sup>12</sup> Cases like this were distressing, and going for long walks became my release mechanism and a way to emotionally re-charge.

A second personal challenge that I experienced as my research progressed was managing feelings of guilt. Some of the women whom I interviewed were in their late 30s, and it was impossible not to reflect on the vast differences between their lives and my own. One interviewee, for example, was just 15 years old when the Bosnian war began and was raped multiple times in eastern BiH. She married three years later and became a victim of domestic violence. Today, she lives with her two grown-up children, neither of whom has a job, and works all the hours she can as a cleaner to put food on the table. **In contrast, I live in a stable**

and wealthy country, I have a secure and well-paid job and I have numerous opportunities to travel and enjoy new experiences.

I always endeavoured to minimize power imbalances by keeping interviews informal, responding to interviewees' questions about my own life and approaching the research as a bidirectional process; 'I am subject, object, and researcher. My participants are subjects, objects, and actors' (Deutsch 2004: 889). Yet, working with men and women who had experienced so much tragedy and misfortune made me acutely aware of the structural imbalances between us that could not be attenuated. I became close friends with one interviewee in particular and we regularly spoke on the phone. Whenever we did so, I was usually travelling somewhere. She never went anywhere and sometimes did not even leave the house for several days or weeks at a time. Like Punch (2012: 8-9), who undertook fieldwork in rural southern Bolivia, I found that 'Feelings of guilt seemed to dominate the research process...'.

My position of privilege, moreover – as a financially-independent white British woman and academic – meant that some interviewees assumed that I would be able to help them. An interviewee in northeast BiH, for example, emotionally showed me photographs of her 12-year-son who had died from a brain tumour. He had only a modest grave and she wanted to have an engraved memorial stone for him. She hoped that I would find a donor to pay for this. My desire to help those in need, and my ability to do so in only limited ways, further fuelled a sense of guilt. As Lofland and Lofland (1995: 51) point out, researchers 'must often struggle with the personally painful question of whether to throw in the towel on doing research and give themselves over entirely to "helping" or to remain in the field as a chronicler of difficulties'. Ultimately, I chose to focus my efforts more on advocacy than on

‘helping’. I gave several media interviews during my fieldwork; since returning home I have joined the government’s UK Team of Experts on the Prevention of Sexual Violence in Conflict; I am still in contact with some of my interviewees; and I will shortly be undertaking a new research project, with *Snaga Žene*, to educate and sensitize communities in BiH about rape and sexual violence. To cite MacKenzie, Christensen and Turner (2015: 117), ‘...the true potential for advocacy in our research is through long-term commitment’.

The longer I spent in the field, however, the more I began to feel that I was becoming desensitized to individual stories of suffering and trauma. These stories ceased to shock me and became almost routine. This triggered new feelings of guilt. Yet, it is not the case, *pace* Zembylas (2009: 233), that ‘being desensitized essentially means unwilling to do something about others’ suffering’. It was probably my frustration at being unable to significantly help the people with whom I was working, and my concomitant sense of powerlessness, that greatly contributed to my desensitization. The latter also became a defence mechanism, a way of allowing me to do my job professionally. Over time, however, I realized that my interviewees’ stories *were* affecting me – in subtle ways. I became aware of the fact, for example, that before going to bed at night, I would always double-check to make sure that the door to my apartment was locked; and the dreams that I have had for a number of years about being in a building and not being able to lock the doors and windows became more frequent and intense.

One particular event occurred in June 2015 that made me acutely aware of my own sense of vulnerability as a woman. It was early in the morning and I was leaving my apartment to catch a flight to Germany. As I reached the ground floor, I saw a masked man holding a gun. He was wearing a police uniform and standing in front of one of the apartments. Initially I

failed to register that he was a policeman. All I saw was a man whose face was masked. Some of the female survivors whom I interviewed had described how their perpetrators were masked, and mentally I immediately associated the policeman with rape. **Momentarily, I felt unsafe and frightened. Time seemed to slow down and I froze. After this encounter, I realized that my daily exposure to heinous stories of violence – primarily committed by men against women – was affecting me.**

The **third** personal challenge that I faced in the field was staying positive and not losing faith. Wood (2006: 384) has observed that ‘In carrying out field research, ethnographers often go through predictable periods of loneliness and perhaps depression during which they question the meaning and feasibility of their project and whether they are adequate to the task’. I certainly went through periods when I felt very negative about the research and dissatisfied with the (lack of) progress that I was making. I found it especially demoralizing when people questioned my motives for doing the research. It was also frustrating when interviewees initially agreed to speak to me and subsequently changed their minds. They had every right to do, but it was always disheartening when my efforts to arrange new interviews came to nothing. I worried that I was failing and I felt under huge pressure to succeed, not least because my research was being externally funded.

My expectations were not always realistic, and learning how to manage them was a crucial part of my research journey. This meant, *inter alia*, accepting that fieldwork is not a linear process and that, inevitably, there are highs and lows. There are periods when everything goes according to plan and we make significant progress, yet there are also periods when we constantly come up against obstacles. We have to be prepared for these oscillating phases in the research process and not lose confidence in what we are doing and why.

## Conclusion

During my fieldwork, I often wondered about other researchers who have worked with survivors of wartime rape and sexual violence, whether in the BiH or elsewhere. Had they encountered the same challenges that I was facing, and how had they dealt with them? Unfortunately, we do not hear enough about researchers' personal experiences in the field, and this is a missed opportunity to learn from each other. I therefore felt compelled to write this article in the hope that it may benefit other researchers, not least those with little field experience. Wood (2006: 385) is absolutely right in arguing that '...very often academic training does a poor job preparing us for field research...'. This situation is likely to change only if more researchers write about their time in the field and about the various challenges and hurdles that they have confronted – and overcome.

I would like to end by offering the following five recommendations to guide those who are planning to undertake similar research. Firstly, it is important to be clear about why we are carrying out the research and what we want to get from it. **I wanted to re-focus attention on Bosnian survivors of rape and sexual violence, 21 years after the war ended, and to thereby underscore that survivors have long-term needs which transitional justice processes should address.** Once in the field, we may often find ourselves questioning what we are doing and questioning ourselves. Having belief in our work and its value can help to ally and manage these doubts. Secondly, it is essential to recognize that not everyone will see the merits and benefits of our research. In these situations, it is important not to become disillusioned and demoralized, and not to feel that we are being personally attacked. How people respond and react to us will be heavily shaped and influenced by their previous experiences of 'opening the gate'. Thirdly, working with survivors of war rape and sexual violence is immensely

challenging. Finding interviewees who are ready to share their stories is just one of the many hurdles that we are likely to face. Our expectations should therefore be realistic. Major setbacks can occur, but these are a natural part of the research process and do not mean that we are bad at what we do or that we are failing. Fourthly, undertaking sensitive research can generate in us highly complex emotions, as well as re-awakening memories of painful events or experiences from our own lives. It is important to be prepared for this and to think in advance about how we might manage our emotions, for example by arranging to have regular Skype meetings with an academic mentor. Finally, the process of leaving the field, particularly after an extended period, can be difficult. In addition to concerns about whether we have done enough, we have to leave behind those with whom we may have formed close bonds. As part of our research legacy, we should endeavour, as much as possible, to maintain these links and to leave behind a positive impression that will benefit other researchers in the future.

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## **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> In one of its earliest cases, the ICTY became the first international tribunal to prosecute sexual violence against men (Prosecutor v. Tadić 1997).

<sup>2</sup> I also carried out 16 key informant interviews with, *inter alia*, NGO leaders and psychologists.

<sup>3</sup> One interviewee, for example, described how she had spent several hours the previous year telling her story to a young woman who had claimed to work for an international NGO. This woman had promised to provide the interviewee and fellow rape survivors in her community with food parcels. However, such aid never materialized, and it turned out that this professed humanitarian was in fact a university student conducting research for a Master's dissertation (author interview, 2 December 2014).

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<sup>4</sup> According to a report by the European Commission (2014: 25), ‘The stalled privatisation process [in BiH] and the unfavourable composition of public expenditures continue to significantly undermine the growth potential of the economy. Unemployment remains persistently high’.

<sup>5</sup> In February 2013, Research Councils UK (RCUK) published its ‘Policy and Guidelines on Governance of Good Research Conduct’. This document is silent, however, on the issue of paying interviewees (RCUK 2013).

<sup>6</sup> In BiH, survivors of war rape and sexual violence have the right to apply for civilian victim of war status, and those who secure this status receive a monthly social payment. While this is an important recognition that survivors have long-term needs, the process of applying for civilian victim of war status can be difficult and protracted, the payments to survivors are often late and many of the rights which this status is supposed to confer – including free healthcare – exist only on paper. Most problematically, no State law exists and there are major inter-entity differences when it comes to survivors’ rights. Fundamentally, survivors living in RS do not have the same rights as those living in the Federation. To cite Amnesty International (2012: 8), ‘The current RS Law on the Protection of Civilian Victims of War guarantees special measures of social protection – primarily in the form of financial assistance – to people who suffered at least 60 per cent damage to their bodies... Applications for this status were accepted up until 2007’. Survivors living in the Federation, in contrast, are not required to have disability and they can apply for civilian victim of war status at any time.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.snagazene.org/>

<sup>8</sup> I use the word ‘agency’ with caution. The point is to emphasize that survivors themselves have the right to decide whether or not they wish to participate in research. It is not for others to make this decision for them. I am not suggesting, however, that story-telling is necessarily agentic. Men and women may experience the storytelling process as disempowering (Henry 2009: 120) and/or re-traumatizing (Brounéus 2008: 71).

<sup>9</sup> The ICTY trial of Jadranko Prlić and his co-defendants, for example, addressed some of the rapes committed by Croatian Defence Force (HVO) soldiers against Bosniak women and girls in Hercegovina (Prosecutor v. Prlić et al. 2013: §757); and the Čelebići trial partly focused on the rape of two Bosnian Serb women by Hazim Delić, the (Bosniak) deputy camp commander (Prosecutor v. Delalić et al. 1998).

<sup>10</sup> See note 6.

<sup>11</sup> Far more attention has been given to how therapists working with trauma victims are affected by their work (see, for example, Astin 1997; McCann and Pearlman 1990).

<sup>12</sup> In BiH, only medicines that are on the so-called List of Essential Medicines are free of charge.

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