‘A Fresh Crop of Human Misery’:
Representations of Bosnian ‘War Babies’
in the Global Print Media, 1991–2006

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During the war in the former Yugoslavia, women of all ethnic backgrounds were raped and many gave birth to children as a result of this violence. Although numerous journalists wrote about the pregnancies and the babies during the war, almost no attention has been paid to these children as such by human rights organisations during or since. Given the purported agenda-setting role of the global media in drawing attention to new human rights problems, this case represents an interesting puzzle and a site for exploring the inter-relationship between gendered, nationalist and rights-based frames in the global media’s representations of atrocity. This article explores how these representations both figured in gendered constructions of genocide and negatively affected the prospects of human rights attention to the children in their own right.

Keywords: children, children born of rape, genocide, human rights, humanitarian, media, nationalism, sexual violence

No one knew her name when she arrived. The staff at the hospital where she was abandoned at birth christened her ‘Emina’. A temporary name, for an anonymous, unloved baby whose future is uncertain ... To the nurses, she is just another tragic victim of the unspeakable Bosnian rape camps ... Her mother could not bear the shame of that birth ...

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She is 16, a Muslim schoolgirl from eastern Bosnia, made pregnant after being raped repeatedly by Serbian soldiers ... When her daughter was born she told doctors to take it away ... Meanwhile, in the same maternity ward where Emina lies this morning, happy fathers are arriving with flowers for their wives and newly born children. These are children born of love – while in the next cot is Emina, a child born of inhumanity.¹

After the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, an uncounted number of children, conceived as a result of wartime rape, were born to traumatised mothers.² Children of refugee mothers in neighbouring Croatia were initially denied citizenship and education rights.³ Local and international actors contested the babies’ ethnic identities and citizenship rights. Inside Bosnia, there were reports of ostracisation and abandonment; some were killed.⁴

As suggested by the footnotes below, much of what we know about the situation of such children in Bosnia-Herzegovina during and after the war comes from news reports. Indeed, reports of ‘rape babies’ in war zones from Rwanda to East Timor to Sudan have appeared in the press over the past 10 years and continue to be a regular feature of atrocity reporting from ‘hotspots’ around the world.⁵ In Bosnia in particular, there was no shortage of stories in the global press about the mass rapes,

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⁴ ‘I will strangle it with my own hands’, a woman is quoted by Slavenka Drakulić, ‘Women Hide behind a Wall of Silence’, The Nation, 1 March 1993: 270. ‘We had to put blindfolds on the women for the deliveries’, said Dr Asim Kurjak at Zagreb’s Holy Spirit Hospital, quoted in Williams, ‘Bosnia’s Orphans of Rape’, 1; Catherine Niarchos, ‘Women, War and Rape: Challenges Facing the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia’, Human Rights Quarterly 17, no. 4 (1995): 659; Alexandra Stiglmeyer, ed., Mass Rape: The War Against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994); Horvath, ‘Children of the Rapes’.
the pregnancies, the babies abandoned in orphanages.6 As Linda Grant has written, in early 1993 ‘the media was desperate for rape babies ... rape in Bosnia was the hottest story of the year.’7

This very vulnerable population, however, was largely overlooked by human rights and humanitarian organisations during the war, as well as by the international movement to protect children’s rights in and after conflict situations.8 As I have documented elsewhere, this is an interesting puzzle from the perspective of human rights agenda-setting.9 It is particularly so since media coverage is often said to be an important permissive factor in drawing attention to vulnerable populations. Domestic agenda-setting theory, often imported into studies of international human rights politics, posits an important relationship between media coverage, public awareness and the policy agenda.10

In this article, I examine the nature of war reporting on rape and forced pregnancy during the 1991–5 war in the former Yugoslavia and its aftermath and explore why it did not translate, as agenda-setting theory might have predicted, into international pressure from human rights organisations or into state policies that would offset the types of harms to which children born of war rape were frequently subject.11

Though the answer is complex, I argue that it can be explained in part by the way in which journalists conducted themselves in the field, and by the way the babies were represented in the news coverage. As the epigram above suggests, the media narrative about ‘war babies’ in Bosnia-Herzegovina relied on at least three frames that, I argue, inaccurately represented the

11. In my case, it took me 10 years to return to this subject after writing a Masters’ thesis at NMSU on state sovereignty and a doctoral dissertation at University of Oregon on the civilian immunity norm.
situation at hand and may in fact have forestalled effective advocacy on behalf of the children.

First, the quote above constructs the rapes in Bosnia as *ethnic*, essentialising the identities of the perpetrators and of the babies: we hear of ‘Muslim schoolgirls’ raped by ‘Serbian soldiers’ to produce ‘Serbian’ children. Second is the emphasis on *women as victims of childbirth*. ‘Rape has become a weapon of this war’, the article states. The victims ‘cannot bear the shame’ of giving birth to babies they cannot possibly love. Third, the babies themselves are described in the most hopeless terms, designed to underscore the barbarity of a country that could produce and then abandon such ‘tragic victims’: this discourse figured in calls for *humanitarian intervention* but also fed into essentialist stereotypes of Bosnia as patriarchal, uncivilised and incomprehensible to Western Europe.\(^\text{12}\) The article thus situates the babies as hapless victims of a diabolical plan, one unleashed through women’s victimisation, one resulting from the barbarity of age-old ethnic hatreds, and one soluble only by the intervention of good-hearted outsiders.

In short, my analysis of these news articles suggests that media coverage of the babies was not generally designed to set the human rights agenda at all. Instead, they constructed the war rapes through discourse at the intersection of nationalism, feminism and humanitarianism, rather than through a child-rights lens. This story functioned predominantly to construct violence in the Balkans as simultaneously horrific and distant from the ‘civilised’ industrialised West. These interrelated media discourses played into Western publics’ concern with the conflict itself, rather than with the specific inter-generational trauma suggested by the babies’ existence. This also explains why attention to these babies dropped off the international agenda as the war ended and returned only around the 10-year anniversary of the war.

My analysis is based on two sets of data. First, I draw on fieldwork conducted in Bosnia and in human rights hubs (Geneva, Montreal, The Hague, Washington, New York) between 2004 and 2007. This work was conducted as part of a larger book project seeking to understand the inattention by the human rights community to ‘children born of war’.

12. Despite the fact that ‘Emina’, the child in the article, had been adopted by a Croatian couple by the time the piece went to press, the baby is described as ‘anonymous, unloved’, ‘forsaken’, and defined in terms of her biological origins, as ‘born of horror’, ‘born of inhumanity’; the possibility of securing a future for such children in Bosnia is discounted, their ‘only hope’ to be ‘airlifted to safety ... [this] policy is the only sure chance these children have of survival’.

it is an important part, and this particular case study has implications for understanding the role of war reporters in conflict zones more broadly.

Secondly, I interrogate the media frames themselves through a content analysis of 54 articles published between August 1992 and 2005. Both these data sources suggest that certain local and global assumptions about rape, ethnicity and violence played an important role in constraining the political space available to think about children born of war as individuals with rights to be protected; and that the global media actively constructed and reinforced these meanings, rather than challenging them.

Below, I situate the global print media as an institution within the system of transnational players in conflict-affected regions. I then survey and critique the role sometimes played by journalists in constructing new human rights claims on the basis of reporting out of war zones. Journalists adopt different strategies in conflict zones with different motivations; at times the frames they choose can work at cross-purposes. Next, I analyse the specific frames used to describe children born of war rape in Bosnia and demonstrate how they fed into three dominant constructions of human rights in the war, to the exclusion of attention to the specific needs of the babies themselves.

The Global Media as a Player in Conflict Zones

At first glance, it is tempting to export domestic theories of agenda-setting to the international realm. These theories posit a causal link between the volume and nature of news coverage of specific events and the public salience of those events. In his 2004 follow-up book to his earlier seminal co-authored article, Maxwell McCombs writes ‘through their day-by-day selection and display of the news, editors and news director focus our attention and influence our perceptions of what are the most important issues of the day’.

Various scholars have expanded these insights to the study of foreign policy.

14. These were identified using a Lexis-Nexis search with the keywords ‘rape’ and ‘bosnia’ and ['babies' or 'pregnancy' or 'children']. A code-list was developed to identify themes of interest across the articles, including reference to rape and to pregnancy, to victims and to perpetrators, and to ethnic, gender and age groups within these categories; and other themes. A team of two coders was trained to annotate the article independently using Atlas.ti 5.0. Inter-coder reliability was measured using the Cohen’s Kappa; the code-list was refined until coders achieved a score of 0.6 or higher. Remaining mismatches were adjudicated by the author. An Atlas.ti copy bundle containing the code definitions and complete annotated dataset is available from the author.


A variety of human rights scholarship echoes this claim. Media coverage is often cited as a driving force behind disproportionate attention to certain regions\(^{17}\) types of rights\(^{18}\) and categories of victim.\(^{19}\) A literature on the ‘CNN effect’ emerged after the early post-Cold War interventions in Somalia and northern Iraq to posit a direct influence of media on state foreign policy-making on human rights crises; other scholarship has made a broader claim that media influence public opinion, which then influence foreign policy.\(^{20}\) Moving from the impact on states to the impact on human rights NGOs and the global advocacy agenda, a variety of literature dealing with transnational advocacy networks suggests that the media salience of issues or emergencies is an important factor in their likelihood of being reported by the human rights sector.\(^{21}\) That the global media enable and promote attention to specific human rights issues is also suggested by comments in focus groups I conducted for this project: as one participant put it, ‘When reports come out and the public gets outraged by it, that is what drives change.’ The war in Bosnia offers plenty of examples, from Ed Vulliamy’s photographs of Fikret Alic at Tnopolje to Roy Gutman’s exposé on rape camps, to support the idea that issues become prominent on the global public agenda when the media covers them in certain ways.

Moreover, how donor publics are encouraged to imagine a conflict can be as important as which conflict they are asked to consider or what information about that conflict is described.\(^{22}\) With respect to Bosnia, for example, Gregory Kent has argued that the British media distorted understandings of the conflict in several ways, including framing it as a ‘civil war’ (when it was highly internationalised), failing to invoke the term ‘genocide’ early on, essentialising the ethnic identities of participants in the conflict, and describing the conflict as ‘fighting’ between ‘warring factions’ rather than


\(^{22}\) Dearing and Rogers, Agenda Setting, 75.
siege warfare against largely defenceless civilians.23 These constructs, Kent argues, inhibited decisive action by outsiders and shifted responsibility away from Britain as a bystander to what he interprets as genocide.

Yet research on the media’s role in human rights agenda-setting posits a number of contradictory effects.24 Ron, Ramos and Rodgers have found, for example, that advocacy networks also utilise the media to set their own agenda.25 The CNN effect has been critiqued on analytical and empirical grounds;26 the Bosnian conflict has been described as ‘the best illustration of the absence of an automatic link between media images of suffering and decisive intervention to alleviate it’.27 Piers Robinson has argued that the media’s agenda-setting effect on foreign policy matters only when policy elites are uncertain as to a policy agenda; otherwise they are likelier to reflect that agenda than actively construct it.28 This perspective is borne out by some analyses of the Bosnian conflict: Gowing suggests, for example, that rather than driving foreign policy, media coverage ‘merely created pressure for apparent policy action’.29 In addition, Hawkins points out that to the extent that the media focuses attention on certain conflict zones, it draws attention away from others.30

A number of scholars are in fact sceptical about the media’s agenda-setting role altogether, suggesting that, instead, powerful states use the media to ‘manufacture consent’ for their preferred policies.31 Caliendo, Gibney and Payne have pointed out that the volume of human rights reporting often correlates less to the nature of the abuses in a given country and more to great power interests.32


27. Carruthers, The Media at War.


32. Caliendo et al., ‘All the News that’s Fit to Print?’
At a minimum, the relationship of the print media to the construction of human rights claims in conflict zones is more complicated than a direct relationship between the amount or type of coverage and policy outcomes. Drawing on cases from the early post-Cold War era, Minear, Scott and Weiss describe a mutual feedback loop in conflict zones between the news media, local and third-party governments and humanitarian organisations. By choosing whether to publicise alleged atrocities, journalists play gatekeeper to global public opinion and can serve as a propaganda conduit for warring groups.

Operationally, the manner in which they gather information and the impact its dissemination may have on sources, translators, drivers and fixers becomes part of the landscape of a conflict zone. Much has been made, for example, of journalists’ tasteless tactics for identifying rape victims to interview in the former Yugoslavia in 1992. Such is the relationship between news reporting and the trajectory of conflicts that a number of trade organisations have developed codes of conduct for war reporters.

In the next section, I examine these various influences the Western media brought to local and global understandings of mass rape in the former Yugoslavia through its reporting about babies born of the rapes. As I demonstrate, references to babies and forced pregnancy were a vital component of arguments that mass rape constituted an ethnic cleansing tactic, but the referent for such stories was rarely the human rights of the child itself. Instead, the ‘rape babies’ narrative of the Western press tied into three dominant (and to some extent conflicting) constructions of the Bosnian conflict: as ethnic, rather than political, in nature; as patriarchal in nature; and as both within and beyond the boundaries of civilised Europe.

The Western Media and Bosnian ‘Rape Babies’

The crusade for attention to mass rape in Bosnia is often said to have been kicked off by journalist Roy Gutman’s story ‘Mass Rape: Muslims Recall Serb Attacks’, which appeared in Newsday on 23 August 1992, but earlier

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articles situating forced pregnancy and rape as deliberate strategies of the war appeared in the Western press as early as 8 August 1992.37 Later that autumn, the Bosnian government issued a statistic indicating that 50,000 Muslim women had been raped; the European Community followed this up in December with an estimate of 20,000. These numbers, coupled with the graphic stories of many victims, were enough to mobilise considerable attention towards the situation of Bosnian and Croatian women, and by early 1993 a spate of ‘rape stories’ had exploded across the Western media. A Lexis-Nexis search using keywords ‘rape’ and ‘bosnia’ and ‘babies’ or ‘pregnancy’ or ‘children’, identified 54 articles appearing in the press between August 1992 and 2005, 77 percent of which appeared between 1992 and 1993.38 References to babies of rape appeared in general articles and Op-Eds about mass rape in Bosnia, and entire pieces were written during this period about the babies themselves.

It is possible to view the media as playing a helpful agenda-setting function in regards to spotlighting gender-based violence during the war. Rape reporting served as a catalyst to reframe women’s rights as human rights and helped spark a successful transnational campaign against gender-based violence.39 In telling the Western public to think about gender-based violence, the media helped set the stage for the articulation of mass rape as a threat to international peace and security by the UN, and gave legal activists leverage to address sexual violence in the subsequent international tribunals.

Yet the Western media has been severely criticised for its role in human rights reporting during and after the war, particularly around the sensitive issue of sexual violence. Even today, international journalists are widely seen as voyeurs in post-conflict Bosnia. Interview respondents would relax visibly towards me upon discovering I was a university professor, not a news reporter. One said, ‘I’m only willing to talk with you because you’re a serious researcher, which means you have some standards.’40

One set of critiques centred on the questionable sources some journalists drew upon in publicising reports of rape. According to Rose Lindsey, stories of rape were derived in large part from ‘spin doctors from the predominantly Muslim Bosnia-Herzegovinian government who were

38. This is by no means an exhaustive sample. Many articles I discovered through other means do not appear in this sample; however, the analysis here is based on these reports in the interests of replicability.
40. However, international researchers are also viewed with some hostility in post-conflict zones, as they too profit from the stories collected without, often, returning anything of value to the community.
“selling” the rape stories to western media organisations’. For example, though the number of rape victims remains in dispute, news reporting of what came to be described as ‘systematic rape’ largely regurgitated the estimates put forth by Bosnian government and later international sources. These led, among other things, to widely inflated estimates of the number of rape-related pregnancies and births, and to a media narrative suggesting thousands of Bosnian babies would soon be available for international adoption.

Feminist women’s NGOs working with rape survivors in the former Yugoslavia also actively attempted to interface with the world press in order to draw attention to the rapes as crimes against women, although they competed not only with the government but with nationalist women’s organisations who framed the atrocities through an ethnic, rather than gender, lens. While the earlier problem for women’s organisations was that rape was marginalised in accounts of atrocity, once the story did break the issue became the type of reporting.

To a large extent, the Western media was uncritical of the distinction between different types of rape frames or how different women’s organisations with different agendas constituted very different types of source for rape stories. Thus, reporting drew criticism from some women’s organisations who accused reporters of ‘sensationalism’ and critiqued their generally unreflective and simplistic portrayal of rape.

Others have accused Western news accounts of being brazenly sexualised, even pornographic. An Op-Ed written by Linda Grant in 1993 criticised earlier press reporting on this basis:

There is something sexy, in media terms, about thousands of pretty Muslim virgins sobbing out their tales of sexual violation: ‘The 15-year-old pulled her thin blouse over her full breasts and said, “The Chetnik penetrated me many times”, was the general quality of the news reporting in January.’

Indeed, the news articles I analysed included a variety of physical, even sexualised, descriptions of rape survivors:

42. See Stanley, ‘Reporting of Mass Rape in the Balkans’.
The pregnant teenager sat in the maternity ward, wearing a corduroy robe over a light nightgown, arms wrapped around her waist, rocking back and forth as she told of the horror.\textsuperscript{45}

Kata, dressed in jeans and cowboy boots in the shabby safety of her new home, lives from day to day on the charity of a refugee centre.\textsuperscript{46}

But Grant goes on to argue that such accounts are what sell, and she suggests this explains the paucity of more substantive reporting on wartime rape: ‘When there are no more weeping girls posing prettily, and no photogenic babies in the arms of happy British couples, the long-term fate of a traumatised nation becomes substantially less worthy of media attention.’\textsuperscript{47}

The most salient criticisms I heard when asking civil society actors about rape reporting after the war centred not on media representations but on the way in which reporters interfaced with survivors in the field. Journalists who sought first-hand testimonies rather than relying on the government or women’s NGOs approached survivors directly in collective centres and hospitals, often showing little sensitivity for their respondents’ emotional needs. The emblematic example is a reporter walking into a refugee camp and calling out, ‘Anyone here been raped and speak English?’\textsuperscript{48} Any woman responding to such a question risked exposing herself to those around her.

Journalists seldom offered psychosocial assistance, such as referrals to available counselling, or undertook sensitivity training in advance of conducting interviews with trauma victims. Sometimes women were interviewed in front of family members or were asked leading questions. There were cases where a reporter promised confidentiality but ended up publishing a survivor’s narrative using her actual name; or changed the name but included a picture of the street she lived on.\textsuperscript{49} It is not surprising that some cases of suicide occurred subsequent to the publication of articles about specific rape survivors.\textsuperscript{50}

To deal with the many requests for access to their clients, and address the general lack of professional standards among war reporters, some local women’s organisations developed strict guidelines of their own to govern their role as gatekeepers between the media and women under their care. According to a representative of Medica Zenica, a German-funded organisation founded to fulfil the need during the war for emergency reproductive health care, the first thing the organisation does when receiving a request from a journalist is to ‘type their name into

\textsuperscript{45} Costello, ‘Girl Tells of Mass Rapes in Bosnia’.


\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{48} Grant, ‘Anyone here been raped and speak English?’, 10.

\textsuperscript{49} Personal interview, Zenica, June 2004.

\textsuperscript{50} Andrić-Ružičić, ‘War Rape’, 108.
Google’ and attempt to establish whether they have expertise in the area of gender-based violence. When Medica agrees to facilitate an interview, its staff require reporters to sign a written contract ‘so that we can sue them if they violate anonymity; we want to prevent bad experiences’.\footnote{51} Representatives of Infoteka, Medica Zenica’s PR wing, also engage and consult with the media on issues of accountability:

I can’t remember names; a German journalist was doing a film on rape; we tried to figure out how to show that this is her without revealing the identity. We decided to focus on her hands without any jewelry, and with a scarf ... We told them that when the woman is telling the story, she cannot cover her identity, it is your job because you have the power.

In undertaking this array of activities, organisations such as Medica aim to protect female survivors while also securing their own organisational goals. Their expertise and ready supply of potential interviewees positions them as coveted access points for reporters interested in obtaining an interview with a raped woman. Medica has situated itself to make the most of this role, disseminating principles among local and foreign reporters much as it works to train local police on gender issues.\footnote{52}

I was told in interviews with Medica and similar organisations that the ideal type rape survivor sought by journalists during the war was ‘preferably someone who had had a baby born of rape’ during this period. Duska Andrić-Ružičić writes of reporters’ requests for information from Medica Zenica, ‘I cannot recall a single contact with any journalists in the last seven years that did not contain a request along the lines of “Could you get me an interview with a woman who was a victim of war rape, who was impregnated and had the child?”’\footnote{53} Journalists apparently frequented the maternity wards of hospitals in Sarajevo and Zagreb, eager to be the first to interview new mothers who had a war story to sell. An Op-Ed written by Linda Grant in 1993 describes how ‘in a maternity hospital in Zagreb, a British journalist and a French camera crew degenerated into an undignified tussle over the bed of a teenage girl who was pregnant after being raped by a Serbian’.\footnote{54}

Children themselves were rarely old enough to be interviewed, though in 1996 *Newsweek* reporter Stacy Sullivan managed to quote three-year-old Alen Muhic regarding some apparent teasing he experienced on the block, when children would call him Serb names.\footnote{55} More typically the testimony about the babies came from the mother, nurses or psychiatrists, and sometimes sympathetic individuals in the community.

\footnote{51}{Personal interview, Medica Zenica, April 2004.}
\footnote{52}{Correspondingly, Medica receives publicity through news articles quoting its staff and describing its work, and some more recent reports have concluded with injunctions for readers to provide donations to support the organisation.}
\footnote{53}{Andrić-Ružičić, ‘War Rape’, 108.}
\footnote{54}{Grant, ‘Anyone here been raped and speak English?’, 1.}
\footnote{55}{Stacy Sullivan, ‘Born under a Bad Sign’, *Newsweek*, 23 September 1996.}
Muharem Muhic, Alen’s adopted father, reported that the Western media had been a constant presence in the family’s lives. Although he said it made him proud to see his family in the paper, it troubled him that reporters rarely sent copies of what they had written, sometimes got the facts wrong and seldom followed up. There is also a strong sense in his family that remuneration is appropriate when informants spend the time and emotional energy to provide stories to the media.56 This stands in contrast to Roy Gutman’s methodology for identifying reliable sources among a conflict-affected population, which includes ‘do not pay’.

In an analysis of the coverage of ‘rape babies’ in the broadsheet press, Penny Stanley critiques representations of mass rape but argues that the media did ‘a decisive role in making the subject of rape visible’.57 She suggests that the storyline about ‘rape babies’ in particular appealed to many readers and publishers, especially when linked to the possibility of domestic gains for Western adoptive couples, because it constituted a ‘positive outcome’ of the war: babies of rape was ‘one war issue that might have immediate practical consequences [for British or US parents], and would possibly not be halted by complex political bureaucracy’.58

Yet if babies born of rape were so salient in war reporting from Bosnia, both in their own right and in the context of rape reporting, and if coverage of rape as a whole catalysed the human rights community to address sexual violence as a crime, then why did this coverage not result in greater attention to the babies by the community of organisations engaged in child protection during the war? Below, I suggest that it might be erroneous to consider this an agenda-setting failure, insofar as the general thrust of the reporting was not in fact to construct claims that the babies’ rights per se be protected. Rather, the babies functioned in these narratives as signifiers of atrocity against women, against cultural groups and against the ‘civilised’ international order.

Constructing Ethnic Divisions: Nationalism

Serbian soldiers are being ordered to, literally, plant their seed among the people they revile, the Muslim women of Bosnia ... peace has been shattered, and long-buried hatreds have been dragged to the surface; old scores being settled from the grim days of World War II and even earlier, times when the Serbs and Bosnians fought any number of such bitter vendettas.59

Reports of forced pregnancy in Bosnia were first and foremost stories of ethnic crimes. This narrative did not entirely mesh with the reality

56. Personal Interview, Muharam Muhic, Gorazade, April 2006.
for survivors of gender-based violence in Bosnia, but it did fit with the
predominant media frame regarding the nature and rationale behind
the conflict. Early on, the conflict was portrayed as resulting from hos-
tility between discrete cultural groups, and cast as a war not among
different armed factions with specific politico-economic agendas but as a
war between Serbs, Croats and Muslims as entire peoples.

Gregory Kent argues that such ethnic essentialism by the global press
had adverse consequences. ‘Generalisation reinforced the notion of eth-
nicity as the initiating and sustaining force of the war, diminishing and
contradicting political notions of top-down incitement and organisation
of violence. Simultaneously, it questioned the possibility of a continued
multicultural Bosnia.’ Yet as both Kent’s analysis and several others
show, much of the Western media adopted this frame. As Washington
Post reporter Peter Maas argued, reporters became ‘addicted’ to the habit
of viewing Bosnia through an ethnic lens.

Although it has been said that ‘journalism is the art of the cliché’, arguably there is nothing deterministic about this type of reporting: jour-
nalists and editors make choices that either naturalise conflict or expose
efforts to stem it. According to Dusan Reljic, ‘The media should at least
try to orient its reporting style towards the creation of peace, instead
of intensifying prejudices that in turn heighten conflict.’ A handbook on
war and peace reporting published in 1997 by the International Federa-
tion of Journalists states that ‘by practicing objective, fact-based re-
porting that avoids stereotypes or stirring up rumours, individual journalists
and the media as a whole have a tremendous potential to contribute to
understanding and bridge-building’.

In 2000, British news media correspondents Annabel McGoldrick
and Jake Lynch developed a manual for reporters with a specific list of
suggestions for producing ‘peace journalism’. They suggest reporters

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60. As Dubravka Zarkov has documented, this was very much the case in the
Yugoslav press within all ethnic communities as well: ‘both the images in the press
and the violent strategies of the war were vested with a very specific power: the
power to produce ethnicity’. See Zarkov, The Body of War (Durham, NC: Duke
University Press, 2007).

61. Marcus Banks and Monica Wolfe Murray, ‘Ethnicity and Reports of the


64. Jean Seaton, ‘War, Ethnicity and the Media’, in The Media of Conflict,
eds Allen and Seaton, 59.


66. International Federation of Journalists and the Center for War, Peace and the
News Media, Reporting Diversity: A Training and Resource Manual for Journalists on
Covering Minorities, Inter-Ethnic-Relations and Other Diversity Issues (Brussels: IFJ, 1997).
avoid portraying conflicts in zero-sum terms, emphasising essentialist divisions, adopting language that victimises or demonises, or reporting only the violence and horrors. Instead, they suggest, war reporters should ‘disaggregate the two parties into many smaller groups pursuing many goals’, ‘asking questions that may reveal areas of common ground’ and ask victims ‘how they are coping and what they think’.67

As has already been well documented, media coverage of Bosnia in general fell short of these standards, and coverage of rape and forced pregnancy was no exception. Early on in the war, the Western media adopted the moniker ‘ethnic cleansing’, in use by the perpetrators of the worst atrocities and a throwback to Nazi notions of racial purity, to describe the forced displacement of civilians;68 and the term ‘ethnic’ to describe the cultural/religious/political divisions in Bosnia was in widespread usage by August 1992.

As many authors have argued, this was a gross oversimplification of the conflict, whose origins lay largely in ethnic scare-mongering by nationalist leaders throughout the former Yugoslavia. Until the onset of the war, social cleavages rarely were articulated along religious or cultural lines but rather political or rural–urban divides.69 Significant portions of violent conflict during the war took place not across ethnic communities but within them as different factions contended for control over the leadership.70 Additionally, many nominal ‘Serbs’ or ‘Croats’ did not fight alongside Serbian or Croatian paramilitaries but defended besieged cities along with their Bosniac neighbours as, for example, fellow ‘Sarajevans’.

Yet reporting of rape and forced pregnancy largely followed the ‘ethnic hatreds’ script, casting the atrocities in ethnic terms corresponding to dominant Western understandings of who was to blame in the conflict. My dataset contains 121 instances where the perpetrators of rape are identified as ‘Serb’, and 82 instances where the victims of rape are labelled ‘Muslim’; compared to two references to Croat rapists, eight references to ‘Muslim’ rapists and only 12 and 16 references, respectively, to Serb and Croat victims of rape. In all cases mentioned, perpetrator and victim are of different ethnicity.

Such a narrative is at least somewhat misleading. Gender-based violence during the war certainly had an ethnic component, and in fact constituted a means to construct ethnic boundaries, but the media

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68. On the origins of the term ‘ethnic cleansing’ see Kent, *Framing War and Genocide*, 149.
coverage of these dynamics scarcely captured this complexity. For example, women were assaulted from within their own ethnic groups as well during the war. Feminists in the region documented the rise in domestic violence within each ‘ethnic’ community at the onset of the conflict. According to Maja Korač, a 100 percent increase in reported violence and rape of women in Belgrade was documented by the SOS Hotline for Women and Children Victims of Violence. Politically active women, especially those who opposed the war, were at particular risk.

Individuals in mixed marriages were also particularly vulnerable to sexual violence from within their or their families’ ‘ethnic’ group, but the rape of women in mixed marriages occurred according to a very different ‘ethnic’ logic than that suggested by the media. For example, Croat soldiers were reported to have raped Croatian women married to Bosniac men in order to punish the women for marrying outside of the group; or rape Serb or Bosniac women married to Croatian men in order to punish their husbands for marrying outside of the community. These acts did represent the constitution of ethnic boundaries through the torture of women’s bodies, and no doubt some children resulted from them, but as they drew attention to the essential fluidity of the boundaries themselves, and the acts of power required to enforce them, they received little coverage in the media.

By contrast, narratives of babies as carriers of ethnicity across groups reinforced the notion that ethnic groups in Bosnia were clearly demarcated according to kinship, which as suggested by the high rates of intermarriage prior to and during the war, was in fact hardly the case. Perpetuating and reconstituting this myth reduced the space for individuals committed to a fluid, multi-ethnic understanding of Bosnian identity.

Nonetheless, as Rodgers argues, ‘Focus on the ethnic identity of the foetus ... was common.’ Articles from both during and after the war are replete with passages such as the following:

[A] large number of babies ... will be abandoned this year by their young Muslim mothers, repeatedly raped by Serb soldiers. There has been widespread horror at this latest Bosnian atrocity: systematic rape by the Serbs with the deliberate intention of impregnating Muslim women with unwanted Christian babies.

72. See Mirjana Morokvasic-Müller, ‘From Pillars of Yugoslavism to Targets of Violence: Interethnic Marriages in the Former Yugoslavia and Thereafter’, in Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones, eds Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004). Children resulting from such ‘boundary-enforcing’ rapes would not necessarily have been constructed as ‘of the enemy’ in the sense that the media narrative suggested.
73. Hansen, ‘Gender, Nation, Rape’.
The Yugoslav war crimes tribunal convened a landmark trial yesterday against three Serbs charged with running camps during the Bosnian war where Muslim women and girls were beaten, gang-raped and forced to bear Serb babies.76

Women are always raped in every war. That’s not new. But here it is not only rape, but in the name of ethnic cleansing they are raped and being forced to become pregnant with the specific goal of forcing them to bear children of another ethnic group.

A critical reading of these broadsheet press narratives suggests that rather than promoting an understanding of children’s rights and how to secure them, stories of ‘Bosnian rape babies’ helped to construct and naturalise the very racialised understandings of the conflict and of kinship that would make securing their rights most difficult. Indeed, whereas ethnic homogeneity was a myth of sorts prior to and at the onset of the war, during its course individuals in Bosnia increasingly came to identify with the ethnicities articulated in both the local and global press, which, as Williams and Kaufman argue, has had important social consequences for individuals in mixed-ethnic families.77 In short, framing the conflict as essentially ‘ethnic’ in character and essentializing the babies as packages in which ethnic messages are communicated between discrete, homogeneous warring groups helped construct the conflict environment as one in which liminality is inherently problematic – surely the worst possible environment in which to secure protection for children who are viewed as embodying ‘ethnic’ multiplicity.

Constructing Women as War’s Victims: Transnational Feminism

And rape. Just when you think you’ve read it all, you come across some new, sickening twist in the annals of violence against women. This time it is the politically motivated rape and enforced pregnancies of Bosnian Muslim women with the clear intent of destroying an ethnic group by shaming the women and forcing them to bear offspring of mixed ancestry ... And by the end of my Sunday night reading, I was left with these simple questions: Where are the women in the peace-keeping process? Why aren’t they at the negotiating table?78

A second representation of babies conceived through wartime rape in Bosnia centred on the negative impact these pregnancies presumably had on their mothers, and tied into arguments not about child rights but

77. Joyce Kaufman and Kristen Williams, Women, the State and War (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 417; see also Bringa, Being Muslim the Bosnian Way.
about women’s rights. As noted above, a number of scholars have traced the burgeoning awareness of violence against women as a global phenomenon, now a salient issue in international society, to widespread outrage over reports of mass rape in Bosnia.79

While the dominant media accounts stressed the essential helplessness and victimhood of women, this has not been entirely borne out by interview data collected by some feminist researchers during and after the war. For example, while ‘rape victim’ appears 49 times in my dataset, the more empowering term ‘rape survivor’ is not used once. The Bosnian Muslim rape victim came to symbolise not just the plight of civilian women in war, but the insecurity of women per se at the hands of men and male-dominated security institutions.80

Patricia Weitsman has written that:

In scholarly and media portrayals ... women are assumed to be passive actors in men’s wars ... to be ‘pawns’ or ‘caught in the crossfire’ suggests that women have no agency themselves or are passive bystanders in wars fought by their husbands, brothers and fathers.81

The assumption that rape survivors are essentially devastated by their experience, or the equation of women’s war experience with the vulnerability to rape, flies in the face of women’s agency during the war in a number of respects, and it imposes an unduly uniform understanding of the range of gender interpretations open to women and men within Bosnian society.82 First of all, not all Bosnian women remained in the civilian sector during the war: female military units formed on all sides in the conflict, and women and girls played important roles as snipers.83 Some took part in atrocities carried out in the many detention centres throughout the country.84


80. While it would be a divergence from the subject of pregnancy and maternity to focus on sexual violence against males during the war, it is important to point out that sexual violence was also framed as a crime against women in particular. In reality, men too were raped and sexually mutilated during the war. This received little press in the West, and was appropriated in specifically ethnic terms within the former Yugoslavia. See Zarkov, The Body of War, Ch. 8.


82. Zarkov, The Body of War.

83. Kaufman and Williams, Women, the State and War, 426.

84. A female camp attendant involved in detentions of Bosniacs was described by a survivor in an interview: ‘She said she was from the “White Eagles” and that things were going to change for us. The girl told us to take down the babies’ pants to see if they had been circumcised. The men started talking about making us pregnant. That night the rapes began.’ See Robert Fisk, ‘Bosnia War Crimes: The Rapes Went on Day and Night’, The Independent, 8 February 1993.
Other women were active in civil society organisations, some opposing the war and creating cross-ethnic linkages, others in support of specific nationalist agendas. More specifically, this frame negates the range of coping skills and strategies exhibited by rape survivors in Bosnia. Inger Skjelsbæk’s interviews with rape survivors after the war contradicts the assumption, widely promulgated in the press, that rape survivors were uniformly rejected by their male relatives due to being seen as damaged goods. To some extent, Skjelsbæk found, survivors were able to use the ethnic dimension of their experience as a source of solidarity with their male relatives, who may have also been victims of war crimes; and a number of women she interviewed had been able to maintain trusting, honest, supporting relationships with male partners after the rape. In addition, as Zarkov points out, many rape survivors did not fit the stereotype of the silent, shamed victim: ‘They not only spoke out and demanded justice, but also worked for it, in the middle of war ... There would have been no prosecutions if it were not for these witnesses who testified, refusing to stay silent or ashamed.’

But the dominant media story was one of ‘weeping women’, cast out by a shamed patriarchal society, and the existence of ‘rape babies’ was viewed as the worst possible sequelae for a wartime rape survivor, despite the wide variety of responses women exhibited towards these pregnancies. In many of these articles, the babies are situated not as human beings but as exemplars of their mothers’ plight:

Nine months ago Kata gave birth to Stipo, the product of her nightmare, and began a forced existence apart from the friends and neighbours she had known.

[Melisa’s] baby is the repulsive product of repeated rapes by Serbian soldiers when they invaded last April.

The unwanted children conceived in the rapes of some 20,000 women may be the most lasting scar left by Yugoslavia’s bitter civil war.

The infant is the child of systematic rape, a living, breathing reminder of S.’s treatment during the Bosnian war.

Such constructions are inconsistent with a child rights’ view of this issue. The babies born of rape are described as part of the problem afflicting their mothers; hate towards the babies is assumed and naturalised; threats of infanticide or abandonment are whitewashed or treated as an ordinary and inevitable outcome of ‘ethnic cleansing’. While the Bosnian rapes signalled a watershed in international understanding of women’s human rights

86. Skjelsbæk, ‘Victim and Survivor’.
in armed conflict, these reports did little to connect the children’s rights movement to the issue of wartime gender-based violence.

**Constructing the Balkan ‘Other’: Neo-Imperial Humanitarianism**

A fresh crop of human misery is sprouting from the bloody battlefields of the former Yugoslavia: babies conceived by rape and abandoned by ashamed mothers. The latest born was No. 508, a 7 1/2-pound boy with thick black hair transferred Tuesday from Zagreb’s Sveti Duk maternity clinic to an orphanage after his mother refused to see him or even give him a name.

According to several media framing studies of war coverage, a dominant misconception created/reflecting by the media was the idea that the people of the Balkans had been at each other’s throat since time immemorial. This view was popularised by journalist Robert Kaplan’s monograph *Balkan Ghosts*, said to be read closely by President Clinton; and was reflected in elite Western discourse and written accounts of the war alike. In 1993, the *New York Times* described Bosnia-Herzegovina as ‘a vast and perilous ethnic morass that innocent outsiders enter at their peril’.

Constructions of both forced pregnancy itself and the reaction of victimised communities to an influx of ‘rape babies’ played a role in creating the impression that Bosnia-Herzegovina was a land beyond the pale, apart from civilised Europe. As Hansen has written, ‘Constructing “the Balkans” as a place where this happens implies therefore that the western “we” is different because “we” do not subscribe to this practice.’ Indeed as Hansen writes, the idea of (male) ethnic aggression and (female) victimisation underlay both arguments for and against intervention in Bosnia and cut across depictions of all ethnic groups in the conflict. For example, men of both Serb and Bosniac ‘ethnic’ communities were described in unsympathetic terms in these reports. Serbian soldiers were described as ‘bearded’, ‘filthy’, ‘covered with blood’, ‘drunken’, ‘brutal’, ‘feral’. At the same time, men of the Bosniac community were implicitly situated as unsympathetic patriarchs who would turn away both from their abused sisters, wives and daughters but also from their children.

90. Quoted in Seaton, ‘War, Ethnicity and the Media’, 49.
92. In my book-length treatment of this subject, there is truth behind these dynamics, but the media exaggerated and distorted these truths. Many men supported female family members; many male community leaders, including religious authorities, took steps to protect rape survivors and the babies; and female family members were also complicit in stigmatising or ostracising survivors and their children where this occurred.
Labels for the babies both reported and popularised by the press conveyed the impression that all sides in the conflict were behaving badly. The rapists were demonised for their ‘barbarous’ policy of mass rape while babies were described as ‘children of hate’, ‘products of barbarism’, ‘born of inhumanity’. The rape victims’ communities are condemned implicitly as well for ‘abandoning’ ‘unwanted children’ or allowing them to languish ‘unloved’ in orphanages simply because they ‘represent a shame to society’. Invoking the ‘tragedy’ of babies conceived through rape and then abandoned by local ethnic patriarchies figured ambiguously both in calls for intervention and fatalism that nothing constructive was possible in Bosnia:

That child’s existence reminds the world of the human tragedy that is still Bosnia – a tragedy which, despite the efforts of the United Nations, we are still powerless to end.93

Banks and Murray discuss the contradictions inherent in the emergence of the term ‘ethnic’ as a modifier for depictions of the war in Bosnia:

On the one hand, the Bosnian Muslims were Muslims – if of an apparently rather secular sort – and therefore would normally be placed in a ‘feared other’ category. On the other hand, they were also clearly the underdogs, the victims of ‘ethnic cleansing’, not its perpetrators.94

Did imagining them as perpetrators of conservative-religious-based crimes against innocent babies stabilise this contradiction in the Western psyche? Media narratives of ‘rape babies’ framed Bosnian society as rural, patriarchal and primitive: it was these assumptions about characteristics of the victim group, as much as about the genocidal logic of the perpetrators, that rendered explicable to a Western audience the abandonment of babies and rejection of their mothers.95

Dubravka Zarkov has questioned the construction of ‘rape victim identity’ as rooted in an archetypal ‘traditional, conservative, rural Muslim Bosnia’. She points to the assumption made by many authors that rape in Bosnia is somehow occurring and in fact is more heinous due to the patriarchal culture in which previously ‘chaste’ women internalize shame at the crimes and risk rejection by their communities as a result of sexual violence. Critiquing this construct both in the press and historical literature about the conflict, Zarkov asks:

How much does that imagery of ethnic chastity correspond with the situation of Bosnia in the late 1980s, with educated, urbanised and modern Muslim women who are by no means different from educated, urbanised and modern Croat, Serb, Yugoslav or any other women living in Bosnia, for whom

premarital sex is a fact of life? Or how different are Muslim women who cherish the importance of virginity, and for whom ‘life without marriage and children’ is not worth living, from Croat and Serb women who think the same? ... Why is the Bosnian Muslim community singled out as the one that will stigmatise, ostracise and further victimise women rape victims?96

Such stereotypes helped to construct a notion of Bosnia as both in the ‘heart’ of Europe and culturally foreign and backward, a frame that helped Western European bystanders indulge their sense of moral concern while remaining detached from the conflict as a European war. The view that Europeans were ‘just like us’ was ‘juxtaposed ... with the notion that Bosnia was part of an ongoing Balkan nightmare which had frequently erupted into chaotic, ethnic violence and any involvement should be kept to a minimum or better still avoided at all costs’.97

Pathetic imagery of the ‘poor innocent’ babies played into the media narrative of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a land in which atrocity was heaped upon atrocity – both integral to Europe and yet markedly different in terms of its status as a civilised nation:

Tiny Ivan, just six months old, is an outcast. A monster in the eyes of the troubled, war-riven community into which he was born. ‘There is evil in his genes,’ they say, nodding their heads and turning their backs on the innocent infant who cries out for love.

Such frames obfuscated practical measures for securing these children’s rights: the protection of the babies became embedded in an intervention narrative that called on Western states to ‘pluck’ unloved children from the savagery of the Balkans to the safety of Western couples’ waiting arms:

But there is some hope on the horizon for the children of this horror. The British Government has announced a major initiative to take the babies of Bosnia from the horrors of war and take them to Britain. It is a policy that women – like the mother of baby Emina – know is the only sure chance these children have of survival. Some of the babies will either die of neglect, or end up in orphanages ... their only hope – a fragile hope in this vicious conflict – is to be airlifted to safety.

Thus, this narrative figured in calls for intervention, but also fed into British efforts to appear to provide ‘assistance’ while refusing political and military solutions to the war itself. Non-Balkan countries, in this case Britain, are charged with ‘plucking’ children born of rape from their fate in a ‘barbarous’ country where ‘long-buried hatreds have been dragged to the surface’.

By contrast, relatively little coverage was given to grassroots efforts to counteract stigma against the babies, the courage and coping skills of

women who embraced their children, or the fact that many rape survivors dealt with their trauma by taking up arms as snipers, rather than by wasting away as outcasts. The imagery also constructs the children themselves as objects of pity, rather than subjects of rights with whose protection the state is mandated.

On the hunt for the worst story possible, reporters tended to put the saddest possible spin on what was usually a mixed bag of facts. In the case of Alen, Stacy Sullivan reported in 1996 that ‘the Muhics’ neighbors describe Alen as “a great kid.” But many of them don’t know his name. Some call him “little Chetnik,” a derogatory term for a Serb.’ But Alen’s father, in an interview I conducted in 2006, told me:

A lot of journalists would write, for instance, they would write how that all over that town he’s called little Chetnik, and that’s not true. The town loves him, the entire town is crazy about him. It’s only a very few people who gave us trouble.

Not only did such simplistic rhetoric draw attention away from questions of children as rights-bearers, but it perhaps helped invoke a backlash within Yugoslav society about the possibility of foreign involvement in the protection of these children in those cases where, for example, local adoptive families were unavailable.98 For example, asked about international adoption by a reporter in 1993, Jelena Brasja, director of the Roman Catholic charity Caritas in Zagreb, was quoted as saying defensively, ‘We have a centuries-old culture here and we can manage to bring up these children ... we are not savages.’99

Both the transnational Muslim community and the Bosnian government made similar arguments, opposing the idea of exporting ‘Muslim’ babies to be raised in the West.100 According to some, the rationale behind keeping abandoned babies in situ was the hope that their birth mothers might later be persuaded to raise them, despite the fact that in some cases mothers who had been urged to raise their babies after attempting to surrender them had ended up killing their children.101 Such trends were reported on but seldom followed up on by the international press. The responsibility of the newly recognised states in the region to fulfil their obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and make such decisions based on the best interests of the child did not figure prominently in these stories, as such.

98. For example, Stacy Sullivan followed up in 1996 and discovered nine orphans conceived in rape in one orphanage. Toomey reported 13-year-old ‘Samira’, remained institutionalised as late as 2004.
101. Williams, ‘Bosnia’s Orphans of Rape’. 

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The defensiveness of local Bosniacs and the international Muslim community was fed by the sensationalist media reporting on the issue, from which aid agencies worked hard to distance themselves. Many practitioners I spoke with referred distastefully to journalists who ‘blew things out of proportion’ or gathered information in a manner insensitive to basic humanitarian principles. In such a context, it can be harder, not easier, for aid agencies to broach a culturally sensitive issue without becoming associated with a hegemonic and counterproductive media narrative.

These cultural obstacles interacted with the absence of media pressure to do more for the babies per se, and with the institutional norms among the Western humanitarian sector that mitigated against certain policy options. One of the key media narratives was international adoption as a humanitarian response. But for humanitarian organisations, foreign adoption or evacuation of children out of war zones is generally frowned upon. There has been a long history of exploitation of war orphans, and, as a result, the humanitarian community generally seeks to protect and assist children in situ, with an emphasis on reuniting families; and when adoptions are necessary, to assist the state of whom the child is a citizen in finding a local solution. This norm was very much reflected in the many references among humanitarian players to the fear of baby-trafficking.

Aid agencies had a particularly negative response to Britain’s policy of streamlining red-tape in order to quickly export Bosnian ‘rape babies’ for adoption by British couples. Tim Yeo, then the junior health minister, promoted this policy as a ‘humanitarian response’ to the crisis.

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102. For example, UNHCR’s 1994 field manual for the care of refugee children states: ‘It is UNHCR’s policy that children in an emergency context are not available for adoption.’ See UNHCR, Refugee Children: Guidelines on Protection and Care, UNHCR Refworld, 1994, 130. Available online at http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?docid=3ae6b3470

103. While the Bosnian government indeed preferred this solution, it was not shared by all women’s and children’s advocates in the region. One local employee of Catholic Relief Services I spoke with after the war told me: ‘I think [foreign adoption] would be the perfect thing to do for those children. I think they will always have difficulties here in Bosnia because every time they hear about the war they will remind themselves that they are a result of the war and not a married couple. So I think the future is better for the child abroad, if the family is really capable to support and raise the child.’

His proposals, which were reported in *The Guardian* in January 1993, were criticised by humanitarian organisations given that his government was far less welcoming to female refugees from Bosnia that might be seeking to emigrate *with* their babies.\textsuperscript{105} The British press, however, lauded his proposals as an undeniably ‘humanitarian’ impulse and reiterated his claim that a ‘large number of Bosnian babies ... will be abandoned this year by their young Muslim mothers’, replicating both an ethnic perspective on a highly complex issue and an assumption that the issue was primarily one of scale and of abandonment.\textsuperscript{106}

Because the ‘thousands of unwanted babies’ frame set foreign adoption as the key barometer against which to measure the validity of *some* humanitarian response, agencies who concluded that the need for adoption had been overstated tended to shrug off other possible responses as well. In their March 1993 report, UNICEF, UNHCR and Defense for Children International (DCI) argued:

> The world ... expected that large numbers of infants would be available for adoption in the former Yugoslavia ... in reality, contrary to the world’s expectation, very few infants in that category are to be found ... it would seem that the women are dealing with the matter themselves and that outside agencies are intrusive and unhelpful.\textsuperscript{107}

In short, the construction of wrongs against women and Bosniacs powerfully shaped aid agencies’ preferences when it came to speaking out on behalf of babies conceived by ‘the enemy’. This partly explains why aid organisations consistently erred on the side of promoting mothers’ rights and deferring to the local society when it came to solutions for babies born of rape. For example, the UNICEF/DCI’s report that detailed the many risks to children born of war ultimately concluded: ‘The best approach for the outside world to help these children would be to assist local support systems as required and requested. At all times the mother’s wish for secrecy and privacy must be respected.’\textsuperscript{108}

Once this decision took shape, proposals to develop specific programmes and shelters for the families were quickly abandoned as it was perceived that they would only draw attention and exacerbate stigma. Despite calls for public education efforts to promote social acceptance of the mothers and children, aid agencies did not generally undertake such efforts. Nor did they work to evacuate the children from the

\textsuperscript{105} For an excellent analysis of this debate, see Stanley, ‘Reporting of Mass Rape in the Balkans’.

\textsuperscript{106} Anonymous, ‘The Babies of Bosnia’, 18.


\textsuperscript{108} DCI/UNICEF/UNHCR, Report, 7.
country. Rather, they provided emergency obstetric care where needed and facilitated the anonymous placement of the babies in institutions and with the Bosnian Centers for Social Work that handled adoptions. Aid workers decided that by explicitly not identifying the babies, and clustering them into the broader group of unaccompanied minors, stigma could be mitigated. Once this was done, however, the subject of stigma against the children as a category effectively began to drop off the humanitarian agenda: aid agencies no longer asked themselves what they should do to protect or monitor the babies as a group, for they were no longer able to identify them as a group.  

A Child-Rights Frame?

The implicit counterfactual argument in my analysis is that a child-rights frame might have primed human rights and humanitarian actors to take other measures, and to put more consistent pressure on the government of Bosnia-Herzegovina to fulfil its treaty obligations and ensure that the children’s human rights were not violated. What would have such a child-rights frame have looked like?

Since human rights law is essentially a set of standards governing behaviour of states vis-a-vis their own citizens, a rights-based frame would focus on a state’s responsibility for ensuring the protection of those within its borders against threats to their life, dignity or any of the other freedoms enumerated in various human rights treaties. With respect to children, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Yugoslavia was a signatory, outlines the rights to which all children are entitled, ‘regardless of birth or other status’. These include the right to life, non-discrimination, education, family and protection from abuse; and the treaty states decisions should be made on the basis of the ‘best interests of the child’ principle – not for political reasons. A rights-based media frame would have focused on the obstacles and potential for securing these rights for children given their biological origins, and to ways of assisting and ensuring that the responsible parties made certain such children could enjoy these rights.

My team of coders looked in particular for such passages in the media dataset. They were instructed to look for articles in which children were

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109. The lack of a specific policy on children of rape did not mean that no children of war received specific assistance from the humanitarian community. Some were assisted as part of larger groups; and on a case by case basis aid workers assisted specific babies and their mothers. Others, however, particularly those abandoned by their mothers, fell through the cracks entirely. See Joana Daniel-Wrabetz, ‘Children Born of War Rape in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Convention on the Rights of the Child’, in Born of War, ed. Carpenter, 21–39; Carpenter, Constructing Rights and Wrongs, manuscript in progress.
described not as signifiers of ethnic atrocity or maternal trauma, but as human beings entitled to protection against stigma, discrimination or infanticide. We used a code named ‘Babies-Best Interests’ to capture these sorts of phrases, but found only a few passages in which the point of reference appeared to be the best interests of the babies as such, and even fewer that invoked the language of human rights, protection of which falls to governments.

Most of these passages centred on three issues: (1) whether women should be permitted to abort their foetuses, given that Pope John Paul came out in February 1993 as saying that the women should care for ‘these beings’ inside them;110 (2) whether the babies’ best interests were served by keeping them in the country, where they might suffer stigma; and (3) whether, in the case of foreign adoptions, it was ethical to streamline the process, insofar as it could result in improper vetting of prospective parents. Journalists covering these types of debates helpfully juxtaposed the dominant discourse as it tied into nationalist, economic or domestic interests of particular parties to the best interests of the children:

Babies must not be used to earn easy credit for politicians or to gratify the transitory impulses of well-meaning people.

Aganovic does not believe that the children should remain in the war-torn region. ‘From a psychological point of view, for the future of these babies, they must be adopted,’ he said. ‘And the best thing is to send them far away from here.’

Note, however that these are expressed as moral or political dilemmas, not questions of child rights per se. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is not invoked. The term ‘best interests of the child’, while implicit in these passages, is not used in these articles. Experts on child rights are not interviewed as sources. One editorial opposing the streamlining of adoption practices appears more concerned with avoiding domestic consequences: ‘Cutting corners will only store up trouble for the future and probably cost the taxpayer more in the long run.’111

In the smaller spate of articles that appeared after the war, inklings of a more rights-based discourse begins to appear in some of the reports. For example, Toomey invokes the responsibility of states for the situation of children born of war when she draws attention to ‘Samira’, a 10-year-old orphan ‘caught in a legal limbo’ since the war; and to a number of disabled children born of war still institutionalised in Croatia, whom the Bosnian government refused to repatriate and care for.112 Becirbasic and Secic emphasise the lack of attention by the Bosnian government to the socio-economic situation of the children and their mothers after the war.

112. Toomey, ‘Cradle of Inhumanity’.
Both these articles emphasise not simply the horror stories from the war, but the present situation and in particular the lack of assistance to these families from the governments who are charged with providing a protective environment for these children.

Postwar, a more sophisticated kind of narrative began to emerge as well, more nuanced, less sensationalist, one which treated the complexity of the child rights dimension as it interconnected to the status of the women who gave birth to the babies. Some articles from this period paid closer attention to the agency of survivors, diverging from the standard ethnicised script of the earlier war time period. Toomey’s article pays close attention not just to women who preferred to abandon their children, but also to a survivor who chose to raise her daughter, emphasising the best practices by Medica Zenica that assisted this family, and attempting to capture ‘the complex relationship with her child’.

Interviews with the authors of these articles also suggest a more human-rights-focused approach. This is reflected both in the complexity of the articles themselves and in the reporters’ narratives about the rationale behind their project and their hopes for how the coverage might elicit change:

We were looking for a strong story, something that would matter ... Our government doesn’t recognise this as war condition. The war stopped years ago – these politicians were always talking about women and children when we wanted military intervention, but after the war nobody seems to care.113

We got interested in the subject in October last year when we worked with a couple of articles concerning the war-children born by Danish women, who had had relationships with some of the more than 250,000 German soldiers that occupied Denmark during World War II. During the research in this topic we got to think about the mass rapes in Bosnia and we wondered why we had heard and seen nothing about the women and their children since the end of the war.114

Additionally, these writers clearly took care to ‘do no harm’ through the fact-finding process: several of them refused, for example, to share information on their sources with me when asked, out of concern for their respondents’ anonymity. Two Danish journalists researching this topic in summer 2005 described the lengths they took to avoid retraumatising informants: focusing not ‘on the past and the awful details of the rapes’, but to describe the families’ present situation; and consulting in advance with experts on torture counselling in their own country on ‘how to do an interview [just in case] we got in touch with either women or children – what should we avoid talking about, what danger signals should we look for and so on’. An ethical responsibility towards their informants is also suggested by the efforts these reporters made to ‘give

113. Personal Interview, Sarajevo, April 2004.
114. Email Interview, May 2006.
back’ to the affected communities: many articles in this period concluded with opportunities for readers to send donations to specific families or civil society organisations.

Perhaps it is a different type of journalist who gravitates towards stories about marginalised populations in the aftermath of war, rather than in the heat of a conflict. But there are also far fewer such stories after the war, when, as Toomey laments, ‘the plight of these women is no longer a fashionable cause’.

Nor, she might have added, the ‘plight’ of the children. Ultimately, most of these articles largely take as their starting point the human rights of the mothers rather than the children. When international law is mentioned, it is the emerging jurisprudence around gender-based violence to which the authors refer. The case of a child left in an institution for seven years, then retrieved by his mother, is cast in one article as ‘an uplifting ending, but it sheds light on the tragic experience of the many women’. When I interviewed a counsellor at Vive Zene in Tuzla about the case mentioned in the article, however, she countered this portrayal, suggesting it was not a happy ending as far as the boy was concerned: he had resented being removed from the only home he had ever known, and there were serious emotional difficulties between him and his mother.115

Conclusion

I have argued that three sets of tropes – one emphasising women’s victimisation, one essentialising ethnicity and one positioning Bosnia as beyond the ‘civilised’ West, sometimes in combination – have characterised the vast majority of print media coverage of mass rape and ‘rape babies’ in the former Yugoslavia. An examination of that media also demonstrated how rare suggestions for protecting the babies themselves as rights-bearers were in this coverage, and how when they arose they very often took the grandiose and sensationalist form described in this article, of ‘airlifting’ babies out or exporting them to ‘loving British couples’ for adoption, rather than, for example, pressuring the Bosnian government to ensure their protection through formal means consistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. By discounting local governments’ capacity to exercise their responsibilities under international law, the media drew attention away from these responsibilities and foreclosed human rights organisations’ attention to the issue as a human rights concern.

At the same time, coverage of children born of war and their mothers exhibited the potential to elicit transformative change and even galvanise local and international attention to the problems faced by children and

women in post-conflict zones. Perhaps simplistic narratives are the most that can be expected: as Smillie and Minear point out, ‘the media are not a humanitarian instrument as such ... there is only so much disaster news that the media can and will handle at one time’.116

At any rate, much of this analysis confirms important critiques of wartime coverage of mass rape. One reporter I interviewed, when asked ‘why this story?’ replied simply:

Because we’re vultures ... it’s a story, a poignant story, it’s a story that if I read I will probably read it to the end, because we all love children, we all feel for victims of violence, which includes rape, it’s a tear jerker. It’s as simple as that. There are many other stories you could tell because they would be helping people but you wouldn’t be able to get them into a newspaper. So this is the criteria that I think most of us work under.

But this tendency to sensationalise had humanitarian costs. First, the sensationalism itself may have caused aid groups to discount the validity of constructing ‘rape babies’ as a bonafide child rights problem. Second, the particular frames used have drawn attention away from the specific child rights questions at issue in these cases.

These three narratives became embedded in international human rights institutions in such a way as to preclude attention to children born of war as subjects of human rights concern. As I document elsewhere, they impacted the international tribunal system, and the developments in humanitarian law in response to mass rape and forced pregnancy. They impacted the operational practices of humanitarian organisations in the field during the war, and then of local and international civil society organisations in Bosnia during the postwar period. Perhaps they also function to deflect attention away from the specific needs of these children, and to pose structural constraints to agenda-setting in this area.117

In that sense, how an issue is framed may indeed mute the agenda-setting effects of the quantity of coverage.

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