



MMS Bulletin #138

Applying Human Rights to Sexual and Reproductive Health - a Reality for All?

Service provider and advocacy actor at the same time

Challenges of rehabilitation of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina

De Jasna Zecevic

NGOs often take a service provider role to provide the necessary protection and support for gender-based violence survivors. In order to push the uptake of responsibility and accountability of the government for sexual and gender-based violence response, service delivering NGOs also have to engage in awareness raising, capacity building and advocacy and lobbying work. Vive Žene, centre for therapy and rehabilitation, an NGO based in Bosnia and Herzegovina meets the challenges of such a multifaceted role of NGOs and analyses possible support mechanisms that can secure and strengthen their role and influence on different levels.



Jasna Zecevic at the MMS/aidsfocus.ch conference (Photo: MMS)

Throughout the years, Vive Žene developed comprehensive multidisciplinary psychosocial treatment programs for victims of war, torture and violence. Since 1994, Vive Žene developed from a “emergency/humanitarian” organization to a professional and competent organization working with war and torture victims, giving them access to psychological, social, pedagogical, medical and legal assistance.

Nowadays, the psychosocial work done by Vive Žene is based on understanding that the healing of trauma is a multidimensional long-term process that involves working at the individual, community and macro level of the society. In doing so Veve Zene aims at strengthening the capacity of duty bearers and empowering the rights holders.

Vive Žene's intervention levels

1) Multidisciplinary psychosocial support

Given the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina does not have targeted and professional centres for treatment of torture survivors, except centres for mental health within local health centres in several towns and psychiatric hospitals, our centre became rather respectful and recognized for treating persons still severely suffering from the consequences of torture. Added value to

our centre is the possibility of stationary treatment, when needed, and the fact that beneficiaries do not have to pay for our services nor they need to have a health insurance to be treated in our centre. This is especially important since the current economic situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is very unfavourable for many people, especially for those with heavy traumatic experiences and no income or jobs, who are in need of intensive treatment by qualified professionals but cannot afford it. Another important factor is that beneficiaries feel less stigmatised when treated in our centre than when treated in a psychiatric hospital, where they become part of the official medical documentation, which will follow them like a shadow throughout their life.

2) *Psychosocial community work*

Vive Žene works on reintegration and reconciliation in the communities: The program reaches out and mobilizes members of victims association and their family members (children and adolescents) and helps them building bridges with people of other ethnic backgrounds. It ensures local ownership as well as long-term sustainability by actively engaging identified members of victims associations. A multiplier effect on the community level is ensured through building capacity and ensuring active involvement of key stakeholders or multipliers, such as media, schools, community and religious leaders and youth. A very important moment in the entire process is that beneficiaries could deal with the past in a constructive way. With psychosocial multidisciplinary work we help our beneficiaries to deal with difficult experiences, to reduce isolation, and restore a sense of hope, and which is a first step towards developing or re-establishing relationships with others and with oneself, building a social network of support, and engaging more fully with life.

3) *Prevention of trans-generation transition of trauma in the communities*

Those activities have a special focus on children and adolescents dealing in their own way with the consequences of the war and the transitional situation in the country, as well as the wide spectrum of problems in their families. Lives of children and youth are directly or indirectly affected by the number of processes, which characterise the aftermath of the war and countries in transition and increase the risk factors regarding transition of trauma influencing children's and youth health and their social behaviour. Children have a right to grow up in families, in harmony, in love and understanding, and to receive good education.

4) *Training and capacity building of professionals*

The training and capacity building program is based on a replication of Vive Žene's multidisciplinary integrative approach into the working methodology of local teams in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Professionals from different institutions e.g. centre for social work, mental health centres, public health centres, police and NGOs, gain knowledge and adopt new skills and techniques in the field of trauma (trauma of mourning, rape trauma, sequential traumatisation, re-traumatisation of torture's victims in witnessing process at court). Besides

that professionals of the mentioned institutions will gain new communication skills and will work on personal boundaries. A very important part of the support for victims of war crimes is the creation and coordination of community based services.

5) *Lobbying and advocating for rights of victims of torture and victims of domestic violence*

Through the activities within this program component, Vive Žene made a contribution to positive changes on the societal level that will ensure better rights for our beneficiaries who are victims of torture and violence. Vive Žene raised awareness of victims of torture on the fact that their rights have to be respected, and that the Bosnia and Herzegovina's Government has to change and adopt several laws and by-laws to protect the interest of torture victims. During the "Day of Torture Victims – June 26th", Vive Žene attracted public attention to the pain and suffering of torture survivors in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

How the human rights based approach can positively influence challenges within the Bosnia and Herzegovina context

Vive Žene faces the challenge of being a service provider and civil society actor at the same time: In order to push the uptake of responsibility and accountability of the governments for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) response, service delivering NGOs also have to engage in awareness raising, capacity building and advocacy and lobbying work.

To overcome part of these challenges Vive Žene uses the human rights based approach. The following paragraphs show how Vive Žene empower rights holders and engage with duty bearers.

a) Lack of legal protection

Despite the progress Bosnia and Herzegovina has made in terms of advancing human rights and gender equality, the survivors of sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence (GBV) are still not sufficiently protected, and some of the rights guaranteed by laws are not fully respected.

Vive Žene response:

- Empowering of SGBV survivors in claiming their rights
- The realisation of rights
- Pushing for implementation of laws and regulations
- Capacity building of police, social services, etc.

b) Many survivors are not recognised as victims

Many survivors of rape and GBV live in isolation and have not yet been recognized as victims, nor are their personal suffering, their rights and dignity, taken into account. They continue to suffer trauma and other psychological and physical problems as a consequence of rape and other forms of torture they have experienced.

Vive Žene response:

- Lobbying for official recognition of status of survivors
- Provide long-term support to survivor groups (individual treatment, after care, community psychosocial work)
- Prevention of secondary traumatisation by working with children and young people in affected communities

c) *Many survivors are not recognised as victims*

Bosnia and Herzegovina has a fragmented structure of available services for the victims. This leads to an unequal access to services, exposure to re-traumatization and even to fear for personal safety.

Vive Žene response:

- Building up collaboration mechanisms with other institutions
- Training of professionals from public services
- Formalisation of referral mechanisms (protocols)
- Monitoring of implementation of protocols

d) *Continuous political tensions are challenging Vive Žene's work*

Political tensions and current socio-economic hardship are additionally burdening the population and seriously influencing trauma work, particularly since trauma is a continuous, sequential psychological process for many victims of GBV.

Vive Žene response:

- Contextualisation of working approaches and response (for example in relation to the floods in 2014)
- Awareness raising for interlinkage of context developments and individual and collective suffering
- Accompanying community groups in times of crises
- Work on prevention of transgenerational transmission of trauma

Conclusion

Since 1994, Vive Žene has continuously followed the challenges of working in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina and adapted its working approaches and orientations accordingly. One of the key issues that appeared and reappeared during many years of Vive Žene's work in psychosocial rehabilitation of war and torture victims is their multi-faceted role they have to play by being service provider and conducting advocacy and lobbying. This experience has shown that there should be a strong linkage between those activities and they should be synchronised.

Therefore, regardless of accumulated problems, dysfunctional state and obstructions the state imposes on all NGO's, Vive Žene will continue their long-term struggle for human rights and rights of victims of torture and violence.

Vive Žene was established in March 1994, during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since then, Vive Žene continued the implementation of program activities related to healing and treatment, reconciliation and rehabilitation of victims of war and torture. A rehabilitation program was performed through activities in the Centre for therapy and rehabilitation, as well as in the communities in North east and Middle Bosnia and Herzegovina.

All our activities target victims of war trauma and victims of torture and violence. Programs on psychosocial treatment, empowerment, strengthening of victims from different ethnic groups, as well as working with professionals dealing with torture victims are implemented in the communities where our beneficiaries live.

Through connecting our rehabilitation program in the centre and the work on strengthening groups in the community, a large number of our beneficiaries took an active role in different campaigns, round tables and conferences.

Vive Žene has worked very hard to improve the system for victims' protection, access to the rights, raise the public awareness in local communities, especially the sensitivity of the relevant government departments in terms of establishing a better, more efficient and more uniform protection of victims of sexual violence in war.

Vive Žene in the MMS Bulletin

Results of the MMS/ aidsfocus.ch Conference's Working Group:

Challenges of being Service Provider and Advocacy Actor at the Same Time

Local Non-Governmental Organizations (local NGOs) often take the role of a service provider in order to cater the necessary protection and support for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) survivors. However, in order to push the responsibility taking and accountability of the governments for SGBV response, awareness raising, capacity building, advocacy and lobbying

work has become an integral part of their agenda. While there are international organizations investing in professionalism in local organizations, there is no international support when it comes to influencing politics.

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***Once upon a war...
«Vive žene» - a therapeutical centre for women and children
in Tuzla***

In post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, it has become clear that teamwork between the public and the NGO sector is important for the development of the health system.

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