Article

“I BROKE FREE” Youth Activism and the Search for Rights for Children Born of War in Bosnia

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Abstract: The rise in recognition of children’s agency—that is, their status as inalienable right-bearing actors—has been a welcome change in international organizations, albeit often through a set of media activities that depict children variously as victims or beneficiaries of moral leadership. Typically, a handful of children/youth affected directly by a particular tragedy become the recognizable faces of identified human rights abuses. This research explores media representation of children born of war in Bosnia, “invisible” children who only recently were legally categorized as victims of war. As children who were born of wartime rape, the lives of select young activists have been documented through movies and media interviews since their childhood. This paper explores the costs of such disclosure and performativity, and sacrifices that young activists make to expose their “truth” to gain recognition of their attendant rights. It ultimately highlights the tension between the search for the rights of affected children and the dilemmas inherent in the actions of the few youth activists who publicly embrace the conditions of their birth to bring voice to others.

Keywords: Children Born of War; post-conflict reconstruction; victim rights; children’s rights; youth activism; Bosnia; documentary media; wartime rape; performativity; resilience

1. Introduction

On 14 July 2022, the Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BDBiH) passed a Law on the Civilian Victims of War. This law contained a landmark resolution which recognized children born of war as victims, making Bosnia only the third country after Norway and Columbia to bestow such recognition on a community of children and youth widely stigmatized or even ostracized in their societies (Hatibie 2022). ‘Children Born of War’ (CBOW) is the term that describes children who were born of a local mother and a foreign biological father during conditions of war, often as a result of sexual and gendered violence during semi-consensual or nonconsensual relationships (Children Born of War CHIBOW 2023). While UNICEF and the International Criminal Court (ICC) have vocally advocated for the rights of millions of such children of war in recent years (Dowds 2019), there is no international organization or national institution that systematically collects the relevant data, as the fates of millions of unsought babies remain unknown. This record makes legal recognition provided to children born of war in Bosnian local laws exceptional, a victory that likely would not have succeeded without the efforts of a small set of affected Bosnian activists.

The rise in recognition of children’s agency as humans deserving of inalienable rights and their resilience in surviving and coping with tragedy has been a welcome change over the past two decades (Beier 2020). This shift has gained traction in the context of growing youth advocacy in issues such as climate change, education, child labor, and immigration. At the same time, media coverage of youth and child voices often remains channeled through a set of blinders that depict children as either innocent victims, ‘damaged goods,’ or exemplary models of intellectual and moral leadership (Huynh 2015; Beier 2020). Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society groups that advocate for the
children have led local and international media efforts that engage or contextualize children that, traditionally, have been unacknowledged or invisible—such as Children Born of War. Select children and youth have been directly engaged by myriad organizations and individuals determined to represent their voices, with access to venues such as TV interviews, social media posts, life-story documentaries, and movies to raise awareness of their particular circumstances. Typically, a handful of children or youth affected directly by a given tragedy become the recognizable face of these media activities, their personal plights standing in for thousands of others who may have been equally victimized yet remain voiceless.

This article focuses on the media representations of three such youth activists who have spoken for Children Born of War in Bosnia over the last decade: Lejla Damon, Ajna Jusic and Alen Muhic (Damon and Damon 2020; Dobson 2018; DW Documentary 2019; Gegić 2015; Khan 2019; Jusic 2022). While they come from different circumstances and backgrounds, all three children were born during the Bosnian war in 1994–1995. They were rejected by one, if not both, of their birth parents. They are youth whose journeys have been documented, observed, recorded, commented on, and articulated through movies, TV programs, interviews on social media, typically with their and their family’s consent, a camera rolling, in some cases, from the day they were born. Not only are they unique in representing the voices of children of war who typically remain invisible in most societies due to intense social, economic and political stigmatization, but they are also distinctive in the intensity and longevity of their presence of as distinct media voices. This paper brings together two streams of literature: (1) those focused on the right of children and the importance of youth activism in their willingness to utilize their own stories to advocate for others, and (2) those engaging the media presence of affected children with vulnerabilities lived and depicted on camera. Arguably, they have been successful in speaking through the media to tell not only their own stories but also advocate for the rights of other children with comparable birth circumstances. This paper both acknowledges the courage that these young adults display and highlights the costs inherent in the need for ‘truth’ to be spoken on camera for young adults to be taken seriously in domestic and international politics.

2. Children Born of War

Often referred to as ‘war babies,’ Children Born of War are “children fathered by foreign soldiers and born to local mothers” (Children Born of War CHIBOW 2023). The children under this broad definition encompass babies born of biological fathers who are enlisted military or part of militia from another community; foreign military who are part of invading or occupying forces; peacekeeping troops; and children conceived through rapes, forced pregnancies or involuntary marriages during war (Carpenter 2010). While the definition is typically aimed at defining children who were born of sexual violence, rape or genocidal rape, the general term also includes children born of asymmetric relationships between local women and foreign military personnel, whether or not these relationships were sexually violent or consensual (Helms 2014; Delić 2017; Simić 2012). As widespread rape has been used as a tool of war by occupying forces, ‘war children’ were originally identified in the aftermath of World War II, in regions occupied by Nazi Germany. Other well-known cases of children born of war are children in Vietnam during the 1970s-era conflict, children conceived through rapes during the partition of Bangladesh, children of U.S. soldiers stationed in Korea, children from forced marriages in Uganda, children of Yezidi women impregnated by ISIS soldiers, and babies born of forced pregnancies in the context of genocidal rapes in Bosnia (Huynh 2015).

The fates of these children have been as varied as the circumstances that led to their birth. As Carpenter (2010) details, the children born of rape are treated as an extension of the sexual violence imposed on local women by the actions of their biological fathers, rather than independent human beings deserving of inalienable rights (Oliveira and Baines 2020). In practice, narratives about war babies sometimes serve as an obstacle to advancing the rights of children. Nations regard these children as evidence of atrocities against their
society or a permanent ethnic curse that serves a persistent reminder of the rape of their nation, products of atrocities perpetuated to erase the existence of their cultural group (Faber et al. 1994; Hansen 2000; Helms 2013). Even when wartime rape is regarded as a crime against humanity, the well-being of such children themselves is often an afterthought. It is difficult to think of ‘war babies’ as human beings entitled to protection instead of products of ethnic atrocity or maternal trauma (Carpenter 2010). There is no other category of internationally recognized and protected groups whose rights end as soon as they begin: the children of rape are perceived as too intimately connected to the crime that perpetuated them. They are forever detained by the conditions of their conception—in effect, having their rights rescinded before they could even claim them (Carpenter 2010; Baines and Oliveira 2020).

The best interests of the children are often trumped by the interests of the nations and states or priorities of non-governmental and international organizations who are more concerned with the rights and well-being of the mothers who survived wartime sexual violence (Skjelsbæk 2012; Seto 2016). Given that soldiers and nations alike typically either deny and dismiss wartime rape, or celebrate it as an ‘achievement’, international civil society and global organizations have emphasized the plight of victims of wartime rape over unwanted children. Even in cases such as Bosnia, where approximately 50,000 women were raped during the war, many public organizations have simply turned a blind eye toward children born of war (Strupinskiene 2012). In situations where the violation of women’s rights is so severe, and their victimization so comprehensive or systemic as in genocidal rape (Skjelsbæk 2006; Hansen 2000), it becomes difficult to promote the rights of both the mothers and the children born out of sexual violence. In fact, the health and mental stability of the victims may require the organizations that support the mothers to overlook the rights of the child to stay with their biological parents, and promote the adoption, reidentification and disappearance of the children from the mothers’ lives and public discourse (Skjelsbæk 2006; Seto 2016).

As a result of the desire to annul the atrocities committed against these women, the fate of the affected children have depended on their communities’ collective preferences. Some groups or nations permitted abortion of such babies (Carpenter 2010). Others streamlined the domestic and foreign adoption of war children, either to the household of paternal lineage (thus separating mothers and babies) or to third countries where the baby may avoid being tagged by the stigma of their conception (Skjelsbæk 2012; Seto 2016; Carpenter 2010; Huynh 2015). In some cases of genocidal rape, nations have elected to keep children in-country with their mothers and make only a limited effort to hold the biological fathers accountable. Many nations avoid any association with biological fathers in an effort to reclaim lost children for an ethnic or religious group and repopulate the country (Helms 2013). Regardless, the tragedy embedded in many of these options serves more to “naturalize the unwantedness of the children” (Carpenter 2010, p. 73) rather than to ensure their well-being. For example, in Bosnia, war babies abandoned by mothers were left in orphanages or placed for adoption. Those who stayed with their mothers became tangible living memories of these women’s trauma; vilified children in a post-war environment of ethnically and religiously homogenous communities. Bullying, stigmatization, lack of resources and lack of recognition for their suffering have rendered these children largely invisible (Neenan 2017). The consequences are profound: a life-long stigma of being ‘rape babies,’ across ethnic and religious divides, compounded by a lack of victimhood status even as they may be deprived of affective, financial and/or social support from mothers who may resent them, biological fathers who may deny their existence, and indifference or neglect from the communities for whom they represent shame and humiliation (Carpenter 2010; Strupinskiene 2012; Seto 2016; Rose 2018; Rohwerder 2019).
3. Conceptual and Methodological Approaches to Framing Invisible Children as Victims of War

Jasmina Zbanic, a Bosnian director best known to contemporary audiences for her award-winning movie *Quo Vadis, Aida?* (2021), directed *Grbavica* (2006) much earlier in her career (Roxborough 2021). This film highlighted the trauma and memories of wartime rape and the lives of affected single mothers, and the publicity created by her vision enabled women who suffered from wartime rape to legally qualify as ‘victims of war’—a designation enabling previously-denied government assistance (Higgins 2022; Gold 2010). But until recently, children born of the Bosnian war have not been legally considered ‘victims’ even though their lives have been affected by social stigma, psychological trauma, and in many cases, poverty since the day they were born (Faber et al. 1994; Traynor and O’Kane 2018).

Globally, children born of war are typically not regarded as the actual victims of war crimes or deserving of reparations (Hatibie 2022). The injustices experienced by their mothers make it very difficult for these children, who may be treated as living reminders of the mother’s victimization, to be given protection. In fact, even though they are victims of the same perpetrator as their birth mothers, their socioeconomic well-being is at risk; and when they survive, they may be sentenced to invisibility or discrimination due to communal stigmatization (Rohwerder 2019; Neenan 2017). Unlike their mothers, they are not allowed to seek redress or claim restitution as victims: “They are a ‘hidden’ victim group whose suffering is entangled in that of another, complexifying the concept of victimhood altogether and presenting a significant challenge for justice” (Baines and Oliveira 2020, p. 342).

In 2018, the United Nations urged the international community to consider recognizing the victim status of children born of war on a global scale (Baines and Oliveira 2020; Cerimovic 2019). Over the last few years, declarations by the UN Secretary-General and the human rights treaty committees such as the UN Committee on Elimination of Discrimination of Women and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as the Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, in conjunction with precedents set by the International Criminal Court, have promoted the protection of children born of war to be recognized as a category of victims, imploring states to create legislation to recognize their rights and needs and prevent their stigmatization (Hatibie 2022). In November 2021, UNCR and CEDAW published a joint statement that children born of wartime rape are stigmatized and deprived of resources, with unregistered births and lack of official documentation that affect their rights to nationality. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) added: “These obstacles can adversely affect a child’s human rights, continuing into adulthood, as they can encounter huge problems integrating into society” (OHCHR 2021).

In Bosnia, over the last five years, relentless advocacy by the of the Foundation for Forgotten Children of War, established by several children born of war themselves, was crucial for the emergence of the local legislation, which in 2022 recognized the victim status of the children for the first time in the aftermath of the war in Bosnia (Delic-Klevstad 2019). After many years of struggle for recognition of their existence and status as children born as a result of wartime rape, the Assembly of the Brčko District took the first significant step in Bosnia by enabling them to recognize their status within the framework of the Law on Civilian Victims of War. This legislation fell short of providing reparations for the children but recognized their status as legal ‘victims’ which, if replicated through Bosnian federal law, may enable them to apply for social support services such as those available to their mothers (Hatibie 2022). By the time this landmark law passed, however, most of the children born of war in Bosnia had aged out. Their entire childhood had passed in a shroud of invisibility in the public domain, with no legal recognition of their stigmatization, suffering and victimization. With adoption and orphanage files sealed, the identities and whereabouts of thousands of children of war remain unknown, so it is unclear what practical effect the legislation will have among the greater population of invisible children.
It is this context of invisibility that makes the three Bosnian activists in this study unique. Now young adults, Alen Muhic, Ajna Jusic and Lejla Damon have been openly living with their status as children born of war for over two decades (TRT World 2019). Alen’s status was disclosed at a primary school playground when he was eight and made into a documentary in which he acted himself when he was just ten years old (Gegić 2004). Ajna has given public interviews about her status since she was a teen, and she is the founder and public face of the Forgotten Children of War Foundation. The rejection of Lejla by her birthmother was immortalized by her adoptive journalist parents’ camera the day she was born, footage that has been replayed in at least two documentary movies (More 2013; Şişman 2019). In each case, even beyond the initial disclosure of their status, each activist has continued to include life story interviews and documentary cinematography in watershed moments of their life journeys, as they search for their missing birth mothers, confront their biological fathers, or make statements about the rights of children of war that places them fully in the public eye.

Christopher Pullen’s (2008) work on documentaries about AIDS orphans provides a useful framework for the key themes that arise in this study of young activists. He argues that disclosure, sacrifice, and performativity are crucial aspects of the media work of children/youth who become powerful agents in dispelling or reforming dominant narratives about their difficult conditions. Like AIDS orphans, there is deep vulnerability in the personal disclosure that children born of war have to make to the world about the facts of their conception, and how they ‘learned’ about their ‘truth,’ often performatively played out in documentaries or life story interviews in the media where the young adults openly situate themselves as the ‘Other’ in their society. Pullen assesses that there is a “balance between the benefits that performance of identity (and personal disclosure) may offer, and the cost to the individual in their role as a sacrificial other” (Pullen 2008, p. 665). As young activists who hope to reform the social order—even at great cost to themselves—they sacrifice their privacy and safety to create public identities that challenge the fragile structures with which their societies make sense of the world.

Pullen’s trilogy of themes by which documentary media reveal and give voice to the ‘Other’ is especially significant in the context of global youth activism. From climate change protests to Iranian schoolgirl movements, children and youth have been in the forefront of political and social activism (Huynh 2015). There are many young people who speak with clarity and persuasion on world problems, many of them refusing to be shut out of the conversations or conventions that directly affect their lives. In wrestling agency in situations where it is denied and forcing international organizations and national discourses to recognize them as actors with voices and choices, they make sacrifices the complexity of their own personal stories by publicizing their story of resistance in a way that often sets them up as the ‘Other’ (Özbilgin and Woodward 2004). Their words, actions, and key moments documented through their own proactive initiatives to speak out, make a mark, and define a better future single them out in a broader communal context of competing discourses and in some cases threats. It is a risk they take to heighten their own visibility, to give up their own privacy to enhance visibility of children and youth voices that contradict, question, and demolish dominant discourses about conditions of similarly born children. Many young activists see this as a necessary move, a sacrifice that pales in the presence of future gains. They speak publicly with honesty and authority about their ‘truths’ to create a world where other children with similar conditions may gain the agency to be who they are.

As part of a longitudinal project that followed the media coverage and stories of war orphans (Ellis 2019) and children affected by war in Bosnia, this research relies on more than 50 media interviews and short news clips, news articles, blogs and documentaries that focus on children born of war as their subjects. These include public media interviews with the three identified youth activists as well as their adoptive parents and biological mothers. Many of the original journalists who documented stories of wartime rape in 1990s-era Bosnia have produced follow-up stories documenting their subjects over more
than two decades, including the women who suffered sexual violence during the war and their children. Interestingly, coming of age in the digital and social media era, young adults themselves have been involved with amateur and professional documentary filmmakers since their early childhood and teenage years, which has led to the availability of about half a dozen documentary movies filming the activists in various stages of their journey of self-exploration and public exposure. As prolific activists, they have also produced a plethora of media pieces including TEDx talks, statements at the United Nations and other international organizations, and news coverage of courts cases and foundation and legal advocacy work associated with their cause. This research draws on discourse analysis (Butler 1988) to highlight the themes of disclosure, sacrifice and performativity in these media productions.

In a strange twist of fate in such situations, resisting their collective discrimination and victimization in society can only be achieved by gaining formal legal ‘victim’ status (Pullen 2008). Bringing utmost visibility to a denied condition has been central to the efforts of such youth activists. Whether or not they identify as victims in their personal journeys, they find themselves advocating for ‘victim’ status in legislation, which is the only legal pathway in Bosnia for children of war to secure legal rights, protection, financial support and (they hope) eventual reparations. This advocacy of legal victimhood for the forgotten children of war, by vocal young adults who have resisted simply being victims of their birth conditions, changes the narrative about rape babies as stigmatized ‘lost’ children. In many ways, their media statements as victims of the Bosnian war have been their own way of situating themselves in, and liberating themselves from, trauma in their communities.

4. Disclosure: I Am a Child Born of War

Lejla is a child born of war in front of a camera. Her Bosnian-Muslim mother, a rape victim, gave birth to her at a hospital where two British journalists were documenting the victimization of Bosnian women during the war. She was filmed saying that she did not even want to look at Lejla in fear that she might strangle her baby (Damon and Damon 2020). Her mom left the hospital shortly after that interview, leaving behind an infant who would eventually be adopted by the same British journalists. That interview and camera shots of newborn Lejla remain on a VHS tape that her adoptive parents eventually shared with her when she came of age. Eventually, her mom’s declaration of detachment became a centerpiece in every documentary movie about her childhood—even though it was common among Bosnian victims of sexual violence to say they feared they would strangle or harm their babies born of rape, a linguistic reference to verbalize the tragic conditions in which they found themselves, unfortunately not unique to Lejla’s birth mother. The disclosure of the conditions of Lejla’s conception is a moment that documentary filmmakers like to dwell upon. Audiences watch a young woman, with her adoptive father at her side, being disclosed (and disclosing to the world) that her birth mother did not love her, wanted to kill her. Young adult Lejla watches the video of her baby-self, with close ups of her face expressions, a documentary filmmaker recording all her reactions through the camera lens (Šişman 2019). It is a vulnerable moment. There is no effort to explain it; just the birth mother’s striking words and Lejla’s ability to bear them and rise above that moment (Šişman 2019).

In the public gaze on Lejla’s life, her life as a ‘war child’ is book-ended between that initial video of her as an abandoned baby, and then 18 years later, a documentary of an intense search for her mother in Sarajevo (More 2013). Several movies and media interviews document her struggle to communicate with her rather reluctant birth mother, to let her mother know that Lejla does not blame her mother for abandoning her. Given Lejla’s activism to bring visibility to plight of children born of rape (and over the years, other victims of war and sexual violence), her disclosure of her own abandonment is central to her public persona. It serves as a point of reference for the viewers to respect this young woman, to invest in her search to find her birth mother, and to make sure that other children born of war around the globe are recognized. Lejla’s disclosure of her abandonment is the
source of her authority to represent and enable those whose voices cannot be public, to gain visibility.

For most children born of war, personal realization and disclosure of the conditions of their conception happen publicly, in ways wrapped with shame and blame in communities that intentionally or unintentionally make public the most hurtful details of a child’s past. In Alen’s experience, he learned of his adopted status, and that he is a child of wartime rape by a Bosnian Serb, during an elementary school yard fight. He recalls, in life story interviews, that he did not even know what the word ‘adopted’ meant and came home to ask his family if the accusations were true. Since his status as an adopted child born of war was already communal knowledge, when a documentary filmmaker contacted him at his Bosnian Muslim village to make a movie about children born of rape, Alen asked to play himself in the movie (Gegić 2004). The decision by the filmmaker to expose a ten-year old in the movie was criticized by NGOs and psychologists alike at the time (Carpenter 2010). As Pullen (2008, p. 667) notes “fascination and a predilection for the idea of encouraging disclosure from the cultural other is still present in many documentaries.” Alen stands by his own decision to embark on this public disclosure of his conception as a child (DW Documentary 2019). Among other things, the movie appears to have made it easier for Alen to raise awareness of children born of war, resulting in documentaries and filmed interviews where disclosure of his status became a starting point for discussion of the rights of children in comparable situations (Karovic 2015; BBC 2023; Dzonlic 2019; Hammer and Sullivan 1996).

For those who were neither ‘outed’ by their ethnic or religious community nor introduced to their history by their adoptive families, information is often discovered accidentally, as youth activist Ajna retells under the documentary gaze (Sišman 2019). Ajna was not an abandoned child of war: her mother, a victim of wartime rape, retained her custody and Ajna accordingly grew up with her mother and her stepfather in a community in which her story was known. Yet, it was at the age of fifteen that Ajna discovered that she was a child born of rape, when she accidentally found notes from her mother’s therapy sessions hidden in a closet (DW Documentary 2019).

In a recent TEDx talk (Jusic 2022), Ajna emphasizes how important it is for the children of wartime rape to be identified as ‘victims’ of the Bosnian war, so they can be entitled to legal recognition and compensation. Ajna’s public disclosure of her status as a child born of war led to her involvement with non-profits and psychology-trained mentors, resulting in the establishment of the Forgotten Children of War Foundation (Delic-Klevstad 2019). Her identification as a child of war is central to every media interview, documentary movie or statement for the next decade that features Ajna (Sišman 2019; Jusic 2022). Her mother is also present in these interviews, often repeating personal accounts of how distant she felt toward her own daughter initially and how she sometimes wished Ajna had not been born at all (DW Documentary 2019). Ajna often highlights the importance of personal disclosures to address the complexity of suffering, ongoing stigma and search for identity that defines such children for the entirety of their lives (Jusic 2022; PBS 2018) While risking public vulnerability and stigmatization, these disclosures establish the truth of children born of war with a platform of persuasion, forming the starting point for their demands and recognition.

5. Performativity: Documenting the Search for Biological Mothers and Fathers

The available public record suggests that most of the children born of wartime rape in Bosnia do not know their biological mothers, since they were either abandoned at the hospitals, given up for adoption, or left to institutional care in Bosnian orphanages (Carpenter 2010). As a result, youth activists’ efforts to bring visibility to the plight of the children of war include transparency about their own search for their biological mothers. At least two documentary movies have been made about Lejla’s search for her birth mother, one where the filmmaker accompanied her on an initial trip to Bosnia to battle a government agency for birth records, and a more recent documentary chronicling Ajna’s efforts to help
locate and get in contact with Lejla’s biological mother (More 2013; Šişman 2019). Alen’s efforts to find his biological mother, who abandoned him at the hospital (where he was adopted by the facility’s custodian), has been the focus of numerous news stories, as was his confrontation with his biological father during the Serbian father’s trial for war crimes, where his biological dad denied that he had conceived a child at all (Gegić 2015). In this context, Pullen’s take seems reasonable: a search for biological parents by “the subjugated sacrificial other, at the same time may be seen as an opportunity for performativity: being able to educate the audience through performance, and possibly able to influence dominant narratives” (Pullen 2008, p. 673).

The search for biological parents is an intimate and vulnerable process for any adopted child, a quest that generates complex emotions under the best of conditions. Undergoing this process as children born of war and under the gaze of a film crew must have its own challenges. The relevant documentaries are told from the perspective of children who seek to find their parents, in contrast to the biological mothers whose contemporary lives are typically founded upon keeping their past a secret. In Alen’s case, his birth mother initially refuses to speak with him. Only over the course of years does she become able and willing to engage, even though her new family in the United States still has no knowledge of him and limited awareness of their mother’s experiences during the war (Sullivan 2021). In Lejla’s case, where she battles a bureaucracy to locate her birth mother, the biological mother only establishes contact through letters at first. She is financially distraught and physically disabled, and Lejla eventually helps her apply for victim’s assistance and compensation through the Bosnian welfare system (Šişman 2019). On the one hand, these documentaries are successful in showing the institutional and societal resistance to recognizing the claims of the children. The efforts of the youth in trying to find their biological parents is stacked against a combination of red tape, bureaucratic denial, and the sheer reality of destroyed, incomplete, or missing documentation. In some respects, the lack of a paper trail regarding the births and adoptions of children born of war are indicative of a history that wishes to erase them.

Media representations often gloss over the fact that a child’s efforts to find his or her biological mother through women’s survivor networks puts children of war at odds with the needs of their mothers to keep their pasts buried to avoid their further stigmatization in society. In the documentaries that clearly advocate for the children to find closure, there is a backdrop of emotional cost to women victims who survived the war, pitting the interests of the children who seek answers about their abandonment against that of women victims who have worked hard to establish new lives for themselves (Šişman 2019). The reluctance of Bosnian officials and female victims of wartime sexual violence to help these children search for their mothers reflects the societal resistance to re-open a chapter that Bosnian society would like to assume is closed and dealt with, whereas being a child of war time rape is an ongoing stigma in the lives of the children, an identification that is central in the lives of the young adults. Lejla’s position as a privileged British teenager looking for her Bosnian Muslim birth mother allows her to persuade the Bosnian bureaucracy to be more cooperative (Dobson 2018). Ajna, who lives with her birth mother, is able to utilize her mother’s networks to find out information about Lejla’s birth mother (Šişman 2019). Alen’s efforts to find his birth mother, who migrated with her new family to the Unites States, was assisted by a journalist who happened to come across both the mom and Alen during the war (Sullivan 2021).

The performativity documented by the media in these instances shows the agency (Alderson and Yoshida 2016) and independent judgement of children born of war in their relentless search for their birth moms while distancing themselves from their fathers. Recorded interviews of Alen’s father refusing to acknowledge his child and denying their biological link even though Alen’s biological mother had testified in court about the Bosnian Serb neighbor who repeatedly raped her during the war serves as a reminder for the Bosnian audiences about the guilty status of men who conceived children through rape and remain unrepentant (Karović 2015). Ajna talks to the camera about her refusal to
undergo paternal testing even though she has found out the name of her biological father who lives in the same region of Bosnia as she does, and that she has two siblings she has never met (Sişman 2019). She does not wish to reach out to her father since in her view it would be a betrayal of her mother who did not abandon her after the war. There are no documentaries about Lejla’s biological father, since she has refused to search for him.

In many ways, the disdain or indifference of these children toward their biological fathers in media stories and documentaries is itself a performative statement. These public accounts serve to distance the children from the ethnic and religious identity of the perpetrators of the rape and dispel the stigma that the children are an extension of the misdeeds of their biological fathers. Simply by performing and situating themselves in the ethnoreligious identity of their mothers, the children get to expose the injustice that these men brought upon their victims and their communities. Children of war have the agency, by virtue of the truth of their own experiences, both to blame their biological fathers and to performatively forgive the biological mothers who made hurtful statements as a result of their victimized position and suffering. These documentaries reaffirm socially accepted notions of victimhood for birth mothers through the agency of the children. Amplified in the documentaries is the argument that women were, indeed, victims; but their children were also victims of war and have suffered as a result of parental abandonment and social and religious stigmas and should be entitled to comparable victims’ assistance (Jusic 2022).

Documentaries of the search for biological mothers also empower the young adults as hopeful to overcome adverse birth stigmas, and in fact, ready to embrace their vulnerable starting point. It is a call to Bosnian society to come to terms with wartime rape as not the end of a woman’s dignity but the beginning of a child’s story.

6. Sacrifice: Trading Invisibility for Stigmatized Publicity

Despite Bosnia’s generational tragedies of war, there have been many efforts to heal, including stories of new families built with survivors of sexual violence and their babies after the war (Skjelsbæk 2006). Blended families have protected their members from the rumors and hostility that can arise from having someone associated with the ‘Other’ in their midst. As Ajna’s adoptive dad points out, his “life was meaningless” before Ajna, and he wanted to keep the story of her birth “a secret forever” (DW Documentary 2019). It is not only the young adult’s privacy that is shattered with public disclosures and persistent media presence but the blended or adoptive family’s efforts to normalize in the aftermath of a war as well.

Bosnian families believe that the truth of being a ‘war baby’ would be painful and traumatic for a child and could lead to an identity crisis and sense of social exclusion (Strupinskiene 2012, p. 60). Alen’s adoptive father, the custodian at the hospital where his birth mother left him shortly after giving birth, adopted Alen and kept his birth story secret from him. Still, Alen was exposed to the events of his conception at school as his local community was already aware of his history as a child born of war, and it was only time before there was a breach of privacy. Similarly, it was clear to Lejla’s British journalist parents that the baby would suffer the consequences of being born a child of war if she had stayed in Bosnia, which instigated their efforts to adopt her and move her to Britain.

Youth activists often have to disclose their status as their ‘truth’—the currency upon which visibility and demands for rights of affected children will be built. Even though there are over 75 members of the Foundation for Forgotten Children of War in Bosnia, few have stepped into the public sphere. The stigmatization associated with children born of war remains decades after the fact, and publicity comes at the cost of social pressures, economic marginalization and even threats to their physical security in ethnically charged environments. Even two decades after the war, post-conflict reconstruction is still not inclusive of the needs of women who were victims of sexual violence, let alone their children. Many young adults, just like their birth mothers, do not want to “trade publicity and vulnerability for a questionable set of benefits” (Strupinskiene 2012, p. 61). In the case of the affected children, there has been no legal access to provide them access to financial
benefits, and reparations are not part of even the recently recognized legal victim status in 2022 (Hatibie 2022).

Consequently, the unique conditions that led to the visibility of these three youth activists are rare and not shared by most others. If other young adults are aware of their status as children born of war, they are very likely to not risk their social and economic status and public safety to gain the same visibility that Lejla, Ajna and Alen have worked so hard to construct. Yet, the fact that the whereabouts of over a thousand wartime babies born of rape are still unknown in Bosnia shows such publicity is an important step to move forward as a society. For Ajna, sharing her truth has given her purpose and allowed her to grow in new directions: “I am ready to share my story anywhere in the world. With my voice I am going to break the silence and show the world how these children live...I broke free, that is your choice.” (Jusic 2022). And as Lejla reflects in a recent interview:

I was one of the first children born of war to come out of the Bosnian war. I don’t feel like it is an obligation to be an activist... and I am not doing this necessarily out of guilt, however I do think it is just so important that we share stories especially in the current climate that we are living in, it can be so toxic and negative and my story, even though it came from something incredibly horrible...it is one of those stories that comes full circle... it is so important that we deliver the message. (In Solidarity—The Migration Blanket 2020)

One concern, looking forward, is societal resistance to the demands of essentially multiethnic children born of war in an environment of relentless ethnic and religious separation, social division, and political segregation. While all three activists identify with their mother’s ethnicity and avoid all connection to their ethnic Serbian or Croat biological fathers, rising ethnic tensions in Bosnia may bring the identity of the children born of war to the forefront as an issue that can trigger discrimination and violence (Rohwerder 2019). Arguably, ethnic divisions in the current political environment do not serve the interests of the youth activist organizations who are seeking war compensation for fundamentally multiethnic children as victims.

A second concern is the tension between victimhood and agency. Resilient young adults, who have not allowed the stigma of their conditions of birth to define who they are, demand victim rights for themselves and fellow children born of war. These young activists emphasize their conception story and their resilience as their truth, while they live the rest of their productive lives outside of the spotlight so as not to take away from their search for rights. Ironically, the resilience and achievements of the affected youth that enable them to speak up as activists are qualities that they are not able to publicly own. In effect, they have become the voice for many others who will never be able to speak for themselves due to varied economic, political, social and personal obstacles, yet their names stand for abandoned and stigmatized children who are somehow alive and strong to tell their stories, articulate and perceptive representatives of the horrors of war.

7. Conclusions

It may be argued that without the media presence of the lives of the young activists, the rights and well-being of other babies born of war would simply be forgotten. The three young adults discussed here already have name recognition, their stories of conception long-ago ‘outed’ when they were children or when journalists first interviewed their traumatized mothers in war-torn hospitals. In the experience of these young activists, it is a fact of life that documentary filmmakers follow them in their journeys in search of their biological mothers or confrontations with their biological fathers. The associated publicity and disclosure simply serve to provide truth and authenticity to their claims that children born of war deserve recognition, and that they, too, have been victims of war. They seek rights to post-war compensation, access to institutions that would help find their biological parents, a justice system that would punish perpetrators and instill accountability, and generative societal healing so that other children of war do not have to hide in fear of stigmatization and discrimination (Lakic 2019).
Yet, there are costs to involvement and public disclosure and documentation, costs that young adult activists regard as worth bearing because of the public good such documentation brings to the overall plight of children born of war. There is only so much international sympathy for women who suffer wartime sexual violence and rape, let alone for the plight of their children. To get their voices heard, young adults have to support their birth mothers’ plights even if they had been abandoned by them in the past, carefully handle their biological fathers to disassociate themselves from any ethnic impurity that their societies love to hate, lead exemplar lives outside of the plight of cameras to ensure that every moment that is captured, documented, and sealed tells the consistent story of victimization, resilience and pride that centers on their search for truth and rights. Their stories must be told repeatedly to inspire, inform, and call to action.

For most children born of war around the world, “stigma and hardship become an intergenerational cycle of vulnerability and marginalization” (Miki 2018). Lack of redress for their experiences, or redress only for the direct victims of sexual violence such as mothers, harms communities, increasing stigmatization of the experiences of invisible children (Seto 2016). Resentment becomes discrimination, which begets further marginalization. The dignity of children of war as rights-bearers is only the first step to overcome state impunity in post-conflict reconstruction (Dzonlic 2019). Acknowledgement of the rights of the children is only possible if their agency as independent actors is articulated in ways that can bring awareness to their communities, make their stories distinct rather than an extension of others’ victimization and their rights recognized as inalienable and protected from ethno-nationalist or other threats. Young activists who stand up to tell their stories undertake disclosure, sacrifice and lived performativity to create a narrative that rises above recrimination and blame, with the hope that their dignified stance might enable a society to overcome its legacy and begin to care for its children.

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