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'Our Place Under the Sun': Survivor-Centred Approaches to Children Born of Wartime Sexual Violence

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Abstract

Children 'born of war' refer to people of any age conceived as the result of sexual violence at the hands of armed forces or groups during war, displacement, genocide or military occupation. Due to the circumstances of their birth, children 'born of war' can experience social stigma, discrimination and exclusion, resulting in diminished life chances and opportunities. At the same time, children 'born of war' fall through the cracks of global policy frameworks. In this article, we explore the reasons for this, arguing that the nature of the harm these children endure renders their status as a victim group elusive. We propose a survivor-centred approach drawing on the lived experiences of children 'born of war'. The approach recognizes the agency of children and draws attention to their expressed desire to contribute to, and participate in, processes of social reconstruction and reconciliation.

Keywords Children born of war · Women · Peace and security agenda · Conflict-related sexual violence · Survivor-centred approach · Post-conflict reconstruction

Introduction

> We are called by various names that are often inhumane and stigmatizing. This will not confuse us and prevent us from seeking and getting our place under the sun. — Alen Muchi, co-founder of the Forgotten Children of War Association

In 2005, Pamela Yates directed *State of Fear: The Truth about Terrorism*, a documentary that uses personal testimony, photographs and archival film to tell the story

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of escalating violence in Peru. Based on the findings of the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation (TRC), the film highlights the story of Peruvians who fought to defend democracy and human rights. During one of the TRC hearings, María Magdalena Monteza Bonavides, a young woman who was raped by the army intelligence service when she was 19 years old, testified to the use of systematic sexual violence during the internal armed conflict. María described the ways sexual violence continues to affect her: 'They killed my youth. They took away the best years of my life, my future and my career. My soul will forever be scarred'. In a poignant moment, she reveals that a young girl standing beside her was conceived as the result of the rape. Her daughter, Carla, was silent throughout her mother's account. At no point was Carla asked to testify to her own experiences as a child 'born of war'. Her subdued presence is unsettling, a visceral reminder of the enduring consequences of wartime rape embodied in a small child.

In countries as vastly different as Somalia, Colombia, Vietnam, Central Africa Republic, Syria and Yemen, children 'born of war' are marked by the circumstances of their birth. They are called pejorative names like 'children of the enemy', 'bad apple', 'rebel' and 'little killer' (Carpenter 2007). Mothers struggle to raise their children in victim communities that are hostile towards their children. In Bosnia, for example, a survivor of wartime sexual violence speaks to the suffering of her child as intertwined with her own: 'I am sorry for [my daughter] because she lives my pain. She does not live her own life; she lives mine'.[1] The identity of a child 'born of war' is deeply contested and politicized within many post-conflict settings (Weitsman 2008). On the one hand, their identity is linked to the victim status of their mother. On the other, the children's identity is shaped by 'patriarchal logic' (Clark 2014, p. 159), linked by genetic inheritance to the identity of the father, the perpetrator of harm against a child's mother and, most likely, the victim community to which she belongs.

Human rights scholars continue to grapple with where to place children 'born of war' in relation to internationally recognized violations amounting to war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity (Goodhart 2007; McEvoy-Levy 2007; Provost and Denov 2019). Children conceived of rape, sexual slavery or forced marriage are not the primary victims of conflict-related sexual violence; no harm has been perpetrated directly against them. However, they do endure ongoing discrimination and hardship. They are sometimes denied basic human needs and may suffer physical and emotional abuse by family and community members, including at times by their mothers. The harms they endure are structural and cultural, forms of violence in which a single perpetrator or specific transgression is difficult to discern. Policies to redress discrimination and the subsequent economic, health and welfare impacts on survivors of war-related sexual violence tend to elide children's rights with those of their mothers (Watson 2007). When reparative programmes are directed at mothers, children benefit only in relation to the socio-economic reparations of their mothers, a problematic approach given that some mothers are responsible for, or are complicit in, the suffering of their children (Baldi and Mackenzie 2007).

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[1] CBC (2012) 'Born of War' Documentary, https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2218893549

Without formal, legal recognition as a unique victim group, children 'born of war' fall through the cracks of policy frameworks (Carpenter 2007). For instance, for the past 20 years, the most comprehensive global framework for preventing and redressing sexual violence in conflict settings, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, has exclusively focused on women in conflict and post-conflict settings. Similarly, the Children and Armed Conflict (CaAC) agenda strives to protect the rights of children affected adversely by war — such as child soldiers — but has not recognized children 'born of war'. This represents a failure of international policy: children 'born of war' do not have an obvious victim status, and so they remain invisible in relevant global policy agendas — there is no language with which to hold them. With no language in which to relay their unique victimization, they continue to fall through the cracks of current frameworks. To move beyond these impasses, we explore a survivor-centred approach, drawing on the lived experiences of children 'born of war' in settings of armed conflict.

We recognize the term children 'born of war' is wholly insufficient to capture the varying experiences and diversity of identities of persons whom we usher under this category. The children may not self-identify or refuse such a descriptor of their experience. Furthermore, we are wary the category infantilizes such persons, where it is otherwise employed to reference persons of any age. Yet, we also recognize that the lack of language in which to frame their experiences also contributes to their invisibility. We adopt the term coined by Carpenter (2007) with unease but regard it as necessary for now in order to work towards a discussion that acknowledges their complex identity and agency, placing it in quotation marks to recognize the limitations.

We also want to recognize the complexity of the definition of *harm*, one that is not easily attributable to a single individual or act of violence. A survivor-centred approach, as we conceptualize it here, moves beyond individual victimization due to an act of overt or direct violence (such as rape), to recognize the ways war violence shapes and divides communities, blurs victim and perpetrator categories and generates structural (the result of intersecting institutions that diminish and limit one's life chances and choices) and cultural violence (social stories that legitimate and normalize structural violence, displacing responsibility onto the targeted group, in this case, 'child born of war'). Together, structural and cultural violence are often described as invisible violence, felt but not seen by persons denied opportunities by it. Furthermore, we understand the word *survivor* in this study as a reference to the accretive harm children 'born of war' experience throughout their lifetime and as related to socially endured harms due to mass or political violence, but also as a term that recognizes their agency to respond to and reimagine a future without harm. This goes some way to address the complexity of assigning responsibility for harm endured, or the fact they are not the victim of the original harm against their mother (Goodhart 2007; McEvoy-Levy, 2007; Weistman 2007), where being born in and of itself is not a crime. It intentionally bypasses legal categories that identify victims as persons in need, rather than political agents of change.

We begin by unpacking the challenges of defining these children as a particular victim group, which has resulted in their erasure within current frameworks. We then propose a survivor-led approach to advance an agenda that considers the

specificity of the suffering of these children and provides an opportunity for children 'born of war' to emerge as independent subjects, recognizing their agency to define the harms they experience and to envision meaningful remedies. To summarize, we understand a survivor-centred approach as one that holds the potential to (a) move beyond individual harms, to recognize collective structural and cultural harms of war violence; (b) repair or remake the social fabric through interpolation of publics regarding the meaning of identity, belonging and imaging of what it means to be together post-conflict; and (c) ground processes of social reconstruction in the knowledge, agency and lived experiences of the children themselves. Drawing on secondary literature, we explore three examples of research that centres on the lived experiences of young persons in the process of social reconstruction in Rwanda, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Northern Uganda. This year presents a unique opportunity since the Special Representatives of the Secretary General (SRSG) on Sexual Violence in Conflict and on Children and Armed Conflict were called upon by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to cooperate in preventing and responding to the enduring risks and harms faced by women survivors and their children 'born of war' and to report on their status by 2021. The Special Representatives will encounter challenges with bringing the struggles of these children to light and defining their victim status. Accordingly, it is of particular importance for them to start a conversation around children 'born of war' that centres the lived experiences and agency of these children in order for any meaningful social transformation to take place.

Missing Subjects: Children 'Born of War'

Occupying an interstitial space between victim and victimizer, children born of wartime sexual violence are missing subjects, a silenced presence in communities affected by loss. In this section, we explore the challenges of recognizing children 'born of war' and the intersections of different institutional silences that might explain their absence to date and which, in turn, beg for deeper reflection on the usefulness of a victim category to hold them.

Silenced and Hidden

Children 'born of war' are often referred to as a 'hidden' population (Lee 2017; Theidon 2015) with 'silent' identities (Baldi and MacKenzie 2007). Their invisibility speaks to a general lack of interest in the fate of children 'born of war' (Lee 2017), the personal wishes of some of these children to not be found (Dowds 2019), and the desires of some mothers to conceal their identity due to fear of stigmatization or rejection. As Van Ee and Kleber (2013) explain, 'silence can deprive children born of rape of a much-needed voice and recognition' (p. 394). Furthermore, silence can create a conflict of rights between the children and their mothers, as well as between the children and their communities. For instance, while their mothers may want to remain silent about their rape and their communities may be eager to

forget and defuse the issue, children 'born of war' often wish to know their origins (Denov et al., 2020). A child's right to know their parents' identities under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 7) may conflict with a mother's right to protection and redress from their aggressors or her decision not to associate with the father (Margaria, 2011:166). The desire to know one's biological identity may be heightened by ambivalent relations with the mother and her community (Denov and Piolanti, 2020a). While some mothers may withhold this information to protect their children, rumours surrounding their fathers may circulate, causing a conflict of identity (Hogwood et al., 2018). A state of knowing-but-not-knowing one's genetic identity may generate psychological and social distress (Denov and Piolanti, 2020b).

Silence also presents a challenge for researchers seeking to document the experiences of children (Mitreuter et al., 2019), further limiting the practitioner's ability to understand their struggles and address violations of their human rights. The identification of children for the purpose of research or policy may further draw unwanted attention, raising ethical concerns (Mertus, 2007). There are many reasons for this. Firstly, their suffering is often entangled in that of another (Theidon, 2015). As previously mentioned, many rape survivors often conceal the traumatic way their child was conceived to avoid stigma. This manifests in different ways. In East Timor, for example, many women believe that through remarriage they can regain a degree of social acceptability, however oftentimes at the cost of silence — by never revealing their past experiences to their new husbands and children (Kent, 2011). Secondly, as they grow older, many children try to hide their identity to escape discrimination from the broader community (Carpenter, 2010b). As Stewart (2017) reveals in her study of children born into the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the politics of belonging, many of these children learned the necessity of keeping their identities secret in order to navigate towards better positions in life. Thirdly, there are ethical concerns about breaking protective silences about children's birth origins and generating stigma by singling them out as a group in need of protection (Neenan, 2017). Aid workers in Bosnia, for example, decided that they could mitigate stigma and promote social acceptance by explicitly not identifying children born of wartime rape and clustering them into the broader group of unaccompanied minors (Carpenter, 2010c). This decision, however, prevented such a group from becoming a recognized victim group and resulted in the subject of stigma against them being dropped off the humanitarian agenda (*Ibid*).

The Victim-Perpetrator Dyad

Efforts by transnational feminist activists to name sexual violence as a war crime ended a historical silence on 'war rape' (Card, 1996; Stiglmayer, 1994). Myriad studies have been conducted on the causes and consequences of wartime sexual violence. In addition, crimes of sexual violence in wartime became a central focus of attention within international policy frameworks, such as the WPS agenda. Critics of the agenda argue that it fails to take a gender perspective; instead, women appear as an essentialist, inherently vulnerable, homogenous victim group (Kirby and Shepherd, 2016). As Hagen (2016) explains, 'these limiting categories, meant to

secure all women, can ultimately create even more insecure environments for certain women who endure intersecting oppressions' (p. 318). For example, studies show that women survivors who return with children 'born of war' face different challenges than those who do not (Atim et al., 2018).

If women are conceived as the primary victims of sexual violence in the WPS agenda, a child's existence provides irrefutable evidence of rape (Watson, 2007). With no primary harm against them, children 'born of war' only recently were recognized in the WPS agenda and, then, as indirect victims of sexual violence in war. As Sanchez Parra (2020) argues, children 'born of war' 'appear in [wartime sexual violence] narratives just in relation to, and as part of, the representation of victims and [to a lesser extent] perpetrators of war-related sexual violence' (p. 30). In this way, they are used narratively to shape other subjects and social relations instead of their own (*Ibid*). For example, they are used to illustrate how poverty, conflict and displacement can make local communities profoundly vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse by armed groups, sometimes resulting in pregnancy. Or relatedly, the challenges of raising children 'born of war' are documented in order to illustrate the enduring burden faced by survivors. In short, where and when children 'born of war' do appear in policy frameworks, their victim status is elided with that of their mother.

On the other hand, they are also associated with the perpetrator status of their fathers. The perception that children inherit their fathers' identities and possibly their propensity towards violent behaviours is fuelled by gender-discriminatory, patriarchal and patrilineal understandings (Neenan, 2017). Drawing on Denov's transmission of trauma, Akullo (2019) argues that in patriarchal societies, the identity of a child is drawn from one's parent's biological traits transferred through DNA, in addition to ecological factors. Accordingly, post-war communities tend to stigmatize and discriminate children 'born of war' on the basis of their genetic relation to the father, particularly if he is a perpetrator of crimes against those communities (Akullo, 2019; Denov et al., 2017; Goodhart, 2007). Fathered by the enemy, a child's future can be further jeopardized by the lack of paternal clan identity and social safety net. Retaliation against children 'born of war' — in the form of name-calling, neglect or abuse — is a way of channelling resentment, anger and frustration towards past actions perpetrated by the enemy group. Some scholars advance the argument that children should be considered as belonging to the maternal clan, seeking to sensitize victim communities by convincing them that, genetically, they are also victims (McEvoy-Levy, 2007). Wary of such an argument, Goodhart (2007) warns it is unlikely this genetic appeal will either hold, and more so, it may only serve to highlight that these children are also half the identity of the enemy group, or that they are simultaneously victim and victimizer (p. 195).

Embodying elements of 'self' and 'other', children 'born of war' are not conceptualized by scholars or policymakers as autonomous subjects or agents. As Stewart (2017) argues, when children 'born of war' attempt to move beyond the limitations of their identities, 'their ability to sustainably occupy positions of belonging is constrained by political forces beyond their control' (p. 42). Due to the political attitudes prevailing after the end of war, they can be used as a political tool in post-conflict nation-building, reconstruction and recovery processes (Weitsman, 2008).

'Their identities and descriptions of their fate', Carpenter (2010a) explains, 'are often manipulated and constructed so as to serve the interests of actors with very different agendas' (p. 14). Carpenter (2010a) is concerned the identity of children is submerged within humanitarian practice and human rights frameworks through a hierarchy of rights and the triage of victim priority. Clark (2014), concerned with the dearth of language and poverty of victim categories, suggests that children 'born of war' might be recast as a crime of identity: 'rape, or more specifically the stigma that it generates, commonly denies the children therein born the opportunity to become their own persons and to develop an individual identity that transcends the circumstances of their nascence' (p. 160). This requires, as the following section elaborates, taking a more holistic approach to understanding the harms a child endures, the 'nested structures which overlap and interact' that govern one's life course (Dowds, 2019, p. 227).

Structural and Cultural Violence

Across diverse geographies and contexts, children 'born of war' endure similar forms of discrimination and alienation that shape their life opportunities and experiences. The concept of structural and cultural violence is instructive here; the harms endured are cumulative and pervasive. Drawing on Johan Galtung's work, Farmer (2004) defines structural violence as 'violence exerted systematically — that is, indirectly — by everyone who belongs to a certain social order: hence the discomfort these ideas provoke in a moral economy still geared to pinning praise or blame on individual actors' (p. 307). Mullen (2015) further explains that 'in the form of denial of dignity, opportunity or access to necessary livelihood', structural violence 'produces or allows direct violence' (p. 464) and 'rarely exists in the absence of cultural violence', which legitimizes structural violence by producing 'the necessary emotions and attitudes for a widespread atrocity to take place' (p. 465). Together, structural and cultural violence enable and justify exclusion from social structures — encountered and experienced in the quotidian — rendering certain groups vulnerable to the violence of poverty, discrimination and exclusion long after (and often, long before) overt atrocities are carried out (e.g. in transitioning or post-conflict societies). Engrained in the system and people's attitudes, structural and cultural violence are rarely perceived, and hence, rarely challenged. As Boesten and Wilding (2015) argue, 'by allowing everyday forms of violence to continue, it legitimizes this violence, isolates those who experience violence and, in doing so, reinforces and reproduces the structures in which such violences are embedded' (p. 76).

Keck and Sikkink (1998) argue that the unique victim status of children 'born of war' 'requires a complex understanding of victimization and vulnerability that is difficult to articulate within narratives that attribute problems to the "deliberate (intentional) actions of individuals"' (p. 2). As offspring of a foreign military force or irregular armed group, children 'born of war' are left in a compromising position with regard to citizenship and group membership in societies that place emphasis on paternal lineage (Seto, 2013). Paternal identity in northern Uganda, for instance, determines a child's entitlements (Apio, 2016; Neenan, 2017). The lack

of recognition or relationship with the paternal clan can have long-term economic impacts if children are denied access to land, medical care, education and other social benefits (Carpenter, 2010b). Land ownership, for example, is vital to present and future livelihood. Children who are unable to inherit land are more likely to be vulnerable to poverty and homelessness and have decreased prospects of marriage (Neenan, 2017). Statelessness impairs their freedom of movement, ability to receive asylum, chances of being formally adopted and increases their vulnerability to trafficking (UN, 2018).

Children 'born of war' also face numerous health-related risks due to a lack of access to medical care. Before they are even born, the lack of assistance (e.g. medical facilities and other social services) available for women who are pregnant during conflict can be detrimental to the health of the foetus and the development of the child (Seto, 2013). Survivors have drawn attention to the fact that some of their children born during periods of active combat have physical disabilities, such as amputations, loss of hearing due to bomb blasts, or health-related issues due to malnutrition (Amony, 2015), and according to Stienstra (2019), individuals with disabilities are disproportionately vulnerable to violence in conflicts and remain invisible and excluded from most post-conflict processes, including peacebuilding. Survivors report physical torture combined with acts of sexual violence while pregnant; many unsuccessfully attempt to abort, exposing the child to considerable health risks and developmental problems (Woolner et al., 2018). Those who become mothers under these circumstances risk experiencing poor mental health, and being parented by traumatized mothers can create additional risk factors for children themselves (Seto, 2013). Children who survive childbirth may be exposed to infanticide, abandonment and abuse and their psychological health may be affected in a variety of ways over the course of their young lives (Carpenter, 2000; Van Ee and Kleber, 2013). They are particularly vulnerable to the possibility of neglect and lack of long-term, supportive family relationships. Some survivors experience difficulty bonding with their children, and even if children have positive relationships with their mothers, they can still be indirectly affected by their mothers' psychological traumas, as well as emotional abuse from close relatives, peers and members of the broader community.

A Survivor-Centred Approach

A *victim-centred* approach to justice after mass violence recognizes the importance of a victim's experiences, participation and voice (Robbins, 2011). Within the field and practice of restorative justice, efforts are made to minimize harm in participation of proceedings and to work to empower and heal direct victims, offenders, their families and communities. Truth Commissions can provide forums in which victims testify to their experiences, reclaiming narrative truth (Lundy and McGovern, 2008). Following the marginalization of victims at the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and Rwanda (ICTR), with negative consequences for the well-being of victims (Koomen, 2013), proponents of the Rome Statute and the International Criminal Court (ICC) pushed for a victim-centred approach, giving victims the right to legal participation. Article 68.1 of the Rome Statute states

that '[t]he Court shall take appropriate measures to protect the safety, physical and psychological well-being, dignity and privacy of victims and witnesses'. The Rome Statute further obliges the ICC to provide reparations to victims. While questions remain about how these expectations influence judicial proceedings, a victim-centred approach firmly entered the language of the court (Killean and Moffett, 2017). In effect, a victim-centred approach moves beyond prosecution and punishment, to centre on the recovery and empowerment of victims.

The determination of victimhood, however, is immediately a political, contested exercise — one that generates a moral economy and hierarchy of victims (McEvoy and McConnachie, 2012). Moreover, the concept of 'victim' 'can denote passivity and a lack of agency; create one-dimensional actors shorn of other, equally important identities (e.g., activist, perpetrator); create competitive cultures of victimhood that deny victim status to the "other"; and embed victim identities as a form of partisan politics, rather than seek to transform them as a benchmark of democratic politics' (Gready and Robins, 2014, p. 357). At the same time, forms of harm are identified as discrete events, attributable to a perpetrator against a victim or victim group. These harms must meet the threshold of war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide under international law, exceeding criminal violence. They also discursively delineate victim and perpetrator as discrete, opposing categories (Clarke, 2009). ICC policies make no mention of children 'born of war', although they may be included under the broader definition of victims, their specific experiences of harm do not (Provost and Denov, 2019).

Brehm and Golden (2017) suggest the concept of survivor navigates some of the definitional limitations of victimhood. As Brehm and Golden (2017) summarize: 'rather than defining an identity on the basis of a particular wrong or abuse that someone committed or experienced, [the] term [survivor] provides a more holistic and positive identity' (p. 107). A survivor-centred approach emphasizes lived experiences and the processes through which a person comes to know and interpret the world, such as coming to know and name the harms they endured, articulating forms of redress, and envisioning a future. Maria Alejandra Martinez of the Aliarte Youth Network in Colombia, an organization that uses art for self-recovery and coming to voice, was born to parents who were forced to join the Revolutionary Armed Forced of Colombia (FARC). Upon the death of her parents, she was pressed into fighting. In founding the Youth Network, Martinez argues, her process of recovery was 'to open spaces in institutions and society in order to find a place to raise [her] voice'. When Martinez began her own path towards reintegration in 2006, she says: 'My first challenge was to understand my rights, what it was to be a victim and what justice and repair meant for me, how I could claim my rights as a woman' (In James, 2016).

Recognizing children 'born of war' as survivors in this sense implies a continual state of resilience, in which they resist and survive despite deeply rooted structures of violence that govern, but do not determine, their lives (Clark, 2021). The concept of survivor focuses on the agency of persons to navigate systems of oppression, and a survivor-centred approach amplifies these acts and interventions to facilitate social recovery. As Gready and Robins argue (2014), processes of social reconstruction after the war should be defined by 'a transformative change that emphasizes

local agency and resources, the prioritization of process rather than preconceived outcomes and the challenging of unequal and intersecting power relationships and structures of exclusion at both the local and the global level' (p. 340). A survivor-centred approach recognizes that recovery is multisided and ever-changing but is also rooted in the imagining of a better future. While a survivor may derive some satisfaction from, say, accessing legal processes, or testifying in a truth commission, such processes alone may not be transformative of the material or social realities that diminish a survivor's life chances. Survivors may well seek to name and seek redress for structural and cultural violence (Friedman, 2018; Lambourne, 2009; McGill, 2019; Mullen, 2015).

For children 'born of war', a range of processes may lead to transformative change: learning one's biological identity, sharing one's story, accessing education and finding a place of belonging. Finding a collective voice through storytelling, however, opens possibilities for entering public space as engaged subjects and wresting narrative control over the politics of identity and victimhood. This may take the form of relationship and trust-building with other survivors, collectivization to strengthen and amplify their voices and the opening of a space in which to enter into public life. International and non-governmental organizations can play an important role in the process of supporting collective action (Edström et al., 2016). Centering lived experiences of children 'born of war' in policy and practice can help recognize and respond to their particular experiences in relation to the context they are in and which they seek to change (Skjelsbæk, 2006). While children 'born of war' may be unknown to each other and reluctant to collectivize in fear of stigmatization or retaliation, this is true of many survivor-led groups, including survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. The choice of survivors to share their stories and enter public discussion, when driven by their own desire, can provide inspiration to others, and can be facilitated by 'listening' allies, such as social workers, NGOs, community elders and family members. Conversely, when they are not heard or recognized, survivors may experience 'ethical loneliness', what Schulz (2018), drawing on Stauffer (2015), describes as 'prolonged and systematic processes of isolation, initiated through victimization and entrenched through multiple sites of neglect' (p. 589). In the following section, we draw on secondary research that centres on the voices and experiences of youth in Rwanda, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Northern Uganda to illustrate.

Rwanda

In 1994, the genocide of between 800,000 and 1,000,000 members of Rwanda's Tutsi minority ethnic group took place over the course of 100 days (Des Forges, 1999). The widespread use of rape as a genocidal strategy by the then Hutu majority government and radicalized *Interahamwe* militia sought to degrade, humiliate and punish the Tutsi population (Hogwood et al., 2014; Nowrojee, 1996). It is estimated that a half-million women were subjected to rape, infecting many with HIV and resulting in 10,000 to 25,000 children born as a result (Denov and Kahn, 2019; Hogwood et al., 2014, 2018). Children 'born of genocide' are not recognized in the Fund for

the Neediest Survivors of Genocide in Rwanda (FARG) and are thus excluded from entitlements to relief assistance and from the designation of 'survivor', as they were born in 1995, despite the fact that their entire lives are marked by the genocide. Furthermore, efforts by the Rwandan government to promote national unity through mechanisms of transitional justice do not recognize the particular experiences of Rwandan children born of the 1994 genocide. Such institutional silences reinforce a sense of isolation and exclusion.

Through careful participatory research with Rwandan youth born of genocidal rape, Denov and Kahn (2019) found that participants in their study possess an overwhelming desire for public acknowledgement and recognition: 'We have been victims of the genocide. Why can't people understand that we are victims? Youth [who currently receive support from] FARG … have opportunities because they are recognized by the government. If we just sit there and stay silent … The government cannot recognize that we need help. We [children born of the genocide] have to be able to speak because we are the victims' (p. 162). Agency and advocacy were perceived as vital to this process of recognition and redress. As one young adult appealed to Denov and Kahn (*Ibid*, p. 163):

> There are many organizations that speak up for survivors of genocide … We don't have to wait for someone to speak for us. We have to stand up and speak for ourselves. I want us to form a club and to create advocacy. We [youth born of the genocide] need to have all the rights that other children have. We need to know each other because we have the same problems. We need to be united, to understand each other. We also need to write our history.

Participating youth referred to the community-based processes of *gacaca*, a grassroots initiative directed at truth-telling and reconciliation amongst victims, perpetrators and bystanders. Some argued that such a process could be a vehicle for them to share their experiences of living with the legacies of the genocide, including the structural and cultural violence they encounter. Linking it to the state-wide effort to build unity amongst Rwandans, some youth stated they had an important voice to contribute to the genocide narrative given their complex identity, and that in speaking about their experiences, they imagine a better future: '…as a generation, we are going to change things, to speak for those who cannot speak. As a generation, we are going to change things that people would never think can change. We recommend to the government to pay special attention to the youth born in that situation, because in the future we are going to build our nation to change the world' (*Ibid*, 166). Denov and Kahn further recognize the potential unleashed when youth are recognized as agents with a will and vision for a different kind of world, in which they are active participants and citizens. Although speaking out can pose a danger, Denov and Kahn are also wary of the 'risk of paternalism… [which could] render mute the voices of youth born of the Rwandan genocide' (p. 167). Myriad possibilities open when careful processes are designed with active mother and youth engagement. In the words of Kagovire and Richters (2018), these processes 'can empower youth, enabling them to develop a sense of self-worth, self-acceptance, self-reliance and new social connections [that] can give them hope for the future and confidence in the present' (p. 30). Despite the painful emotions the disclosure of information

can bring, it resolves much of the uncertainty, allowing the youth to begin to resolve questions surrounding their sense of identity and giving them the agency to construct narratives that make sense of their experiences and connect them with others in similar positions (Hogwood et al., 2018). As a 10-year-old boy appealed to Hogwood et al. (*Ibid*, p. 9): 'It was necessary to know my history because I learned who I am, I know where I stand now'.

For instance, the Hope and Peace Foundation (HPF), an organization that engages social therapy to counsel survivors of genocide rape and their children, strives to open dialogue and foster inter-familial reconciliation. AVEGA Agahozo is an organization that provides services to survivors of genocide rape and seeks to empower them to be catalysts in the political, social and economic rebuilding of Rwanda and has appealed for urgent support to children born of genocide rape with the aim to improve their status (Ntirenganya, 2018). These organizations advocate for support towards the welfare of these children particularly because many of their mothers are now getting old, weak or have died due to HIV often contracted during rape. Advocacy from youth themselves breaks the silence, bringing them into public discourse and potentially works towards the creation of a more comprehensive post-conflict process of redress that accounts for the particular struggles of children 'born of war'. Finally, bringing youth into public space allows them to potentially connect and develop coalitions with other youth who experience similar stigma and discrimination, including orphans or intergenerational survivors who inherit traumatic experiences and socio-economic legacies of the genocide. In a highly politicized post-genocide setting, support to emerging leaders who wish to engage different stakeholders and seek recognition can be enriched by a survivor centred approach: opening space for public acknowledgment, bringing persons affected by the genocide differently into conversation, and challenging and rendering visible forms of violence that are otherwise non-perceptible to the broader society.

Bosnia-Herzegovina

Mass rape was employed during the war in Bosnia (1992–1995) as part of a campaign of so-called ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims and Croats (Allen, 1996). It is estimated that of the 20,000 to 50,000 women who experienced sexual and gender-based violence perpetrated by Serb forces, approximately 4000 became pregnant, and that about half of those pregnancies resulted in birth (Daniel-Wrabetz, 2007). In the aftermath of the mass rapes, infanticide rates disproportionately increased, and a significant number of children were either adopted or ended up in the care system, as many rape survivors did not want to keep the child (Rohwerder, 2019). While research and information continue to be wanting, several important studies have been conducted with children who are now young adults, and several young adults have become advocates within what is now Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH). In their preliminary research with eleven young adults, Erjavec and Volčič (2010) found that the majority had experienced hostility towards them during their lifetime, their identity having been used as a marker of national identity politics (Weitsman, 2008). Under the Dayton Peace

Agreement and in the design of political, cultural and civic systems, 'ethnicity is the single most important marker of national identity in Bosnia, and those who, like the children born of wartime rape and children born in "mixed marriages", cannot declare theirs in straightforward and "pure" ways remain the abject Other in all three ethnic communities'. (Takševa, 2017, p. 21). Given this exclusion and national silence, they and their experiences are rendered invisible; but they are not without the desire to know or do something differently for the future. As Carpenter observed in her extensive study of humanitarian and human rights advocates that failed to engage, 'Each child's story is different; but many face troubling questions about their origins in a society still shaken by the circumstances under which they were born. All need, but few have, a space to openly acknowledge their place in the world and their value as human beings' (2010, p. xiii).

In interviews with adolescent girls in BiH conducted by Erjavec and Volčič (2010), participants said they carried with them a sense of guilt. The majority endured a childhood of poverty and social isolation, exhibiting self-destructive behaviour by the time they reached puberty: 'I see myself as a destroyer of everything…and everyone around me' (p. 371). Some described a fear of developing relationships; others identified strained relationships with their mothers, who they feared saw them as 'a live reminder of rape' (p. 372). Most identified the moment of disclosure regarding their father's identity as devastating, with little to no support in coming to make sense of it. Erjavec and Volčič's emphasize the importance of strong familial social support networks to build positive self-identities. In her research with three young adults in BiH, Takševa (forthcoming) traces the processes through which they came to know and come to terms with their identities. Processes of talking, therapy, meeting their biological mother and with each other hastened the development of a positive sense of self and agency. Lejla, for instance, describes the process of coming to know her origins as a coming-to-be as an activist, 'I cannot ignore what happened. Then I would be just like everyone else in Bosnia. I have been given the means and opportunities to speak about this…I am not just going to not do anything about it'. (Takševa, forthcoming: NP). And so, for Takševa, collectivization is gaining 'a deeper awareness and understanding that allows them to place their own complex identities within a larger set of political, social and historic realities', and with transformative potential for opening dialogue on identity and belonging (forthcoming: NP). For Seada, her identity positions her to directly address the ethnic divisions in BiH today:

> I perceive myself as a rescuer, as someone who can connect enemies . . . who are otherwise not able to come to the table and confront each other. Having blood of both sides in me, the Bosniak and Serbian, it is my duty to speak out about injustices and continuing struggles. I can work toward a better future of Sarajevo—It is here we could all live together, without anger or hate. My mother always says we have to put the past behind and move on. The point is not to forget but just to somehow forgive (Erjavec and Volčič p. 377).

Takševa (2017) further unpacks the claim that young adults negotiate their identities as 'a "third party" who can bridge or overcome interpersonal and social tensions' in divided BiH, and as such, to represent 'an alternative to a form of national

belonging based on "pure" ethnicity that remains inscribed into the country's constitution' (p. 19).

A group of human rights activists and children 'born of war' founded the Forgotten Children of War Association, which aims to empower children 'born of war' to take a proactive role in improving their status. The association provides 'access to education, adequate social protection, psychological support, access to the labor market, and access to justice through understanding and protecting the rights of this marginalized category of children'.[2] It recently launched an initiative to analyze BiH law and promote the adoption of a single law on civilian victims of war, a law that does not segregate the surviving victims from members of the general population. Ajna Jusić is the co-founder and president of the association. She is an active speaker on the numerous rights violations committed against children 'born of war' and believes these children can and should be the drivers of change. In her own words, 'We need to strengthen the idea of an equal society that does not live in the past. We need to strengthen solidarity, empathy, freedom, and choice before all else. This is my advice to the young people: work towards an equal society because only then will we have the opportunity to rise above all else'.[3] In this way, children — now as young adults — link their recovery to that of the collective and understand the harm they experience as born as the result of collective suffering, consistent with the survivor-led approach we outline. The transformative potential of the approach, we argue, involves the reimagining of it through sheer resilience and effort. And so, the founders of Forgotten Children of War continue to speak in public forums — media, the UN and commemorations — as a mechanism of engagement and provocation to think of alternate futures.

Northern Uganda

The two-decade insurgency of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) led by Joseph Kony has produced great suffering in northern Uganda. The LRA has displaced 1.5 million people and abducted between 54,000 and 75,000 people, including 25,000 to 38,000 children (Pham et al., 2008), who were pressed into fighting and domestic labour. Young girls were often forced to marry and have children with senior LRA commanders, returning to their families with their children only years after they escaped or were released by the commanders (Baines, 2014; 2017). Today, an estimated 2000 children born of forced marriage face ongoing forms of stigmatization, othering and exclusion by communities who endured suffering at the hands of the LRA as they 'signify social and moral transgressions and are perceived to embody the immorality of the violence that led to their conceptions' (Stewart, 2020, p. 1). Reconciling the presence of the children in northern communities thus presents a challenge to post-conflict social reconstructions (Akullo, 2019).

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[2] Džonlic, Amra (n.d.) 'War's Forgotten Children', https://balkandiskurs.com/en/2019/01/25/wars-forgotten-children/

[3] Ibid.

A number of children and youth have pressed their mothers to locate their paternal clans (Apio, 2016). Mothers come together with former LRA, civil society members and local officials to identify paternal clans and foster relationships through mediation and ritual repair (Mutsonziwa et al., 2020). The Women's Advocacy Network (WAN), an association of 500 survivors, works with children and their mothers to identify their fathers and their fathers' relatives, some of whom are not aware of the children's existence. There is no official policy holding fathers to children 'born of war' accountable to their paternal duties. Living in a patrilineal society, children in Northern Uganda 'belong' to their paternal clan and it is from there where they derive their lineage, inherit land and have their material needs met (Denov and Lakor, 2017). In seeking paternal recognition and a relationship with their paternal clan, children 'born of war' challenge communities to come together and work towards a better future for the children (Baines and Oliveira, 2021). Former commanders, maternal and paternal relatives, survivors of forced marriage, local government officials and cultural leaders work together to mediate conflict and seek redress, such as compensation to the maternal clan for taking care of the child. The process is ongoing; it can take years or decades to repair the relation and, oftentimes, it can remain unresolved. Where and when children have been publicly recognized by both maternal and paternal clans, however, parties involved in the process have expressed satisfaction. WAN refers to this culmination of mediation as 'taking the child home', where the child is formally welcomed to their paternal home, relatives gather and introduce themselves and their history to the child, rituals are performed to appeal to ancestors and cleanse the child and their relationship, and food and celebration are shared. In such an instance, relationships with the child are strengthened to secure the future of the child. A grandfather (in Oliveira and Baines, 2020, p. 16) who met the child of his own abducted and still missing son reflected on his responsibility:

> I have also confirmed that the child really belongs to this family considering the way she was welcome here. The most important thing is that taking care of a child is not only about feeding, it has now shifted to education and medical needs and these things require that we join hands [to support] and now that I have seen you, people, we shall join hands together with you together including this organization to see that this child has a future.

For some, the process of child tracing brings about a sense of belonging, recognition and compensation. One male participant whose parents died during the war, and who experienced discrimination and rejection at the hands of his maternal relatives, reflected on the sense of justice feeling accepted and having affiliation: 'By having access to my paternal family, I gained a home, belonging, my own land, and people that are my own' (Oliveira and Baines, 2020, p. 16). Although not all processes result in such a resolution, our intention is to highlight a transformative process initiated and led by survivors affected by conflict. According to WAN, the majority of child tracing processes are the result of a child or youth insisting on knowing where they come from and where they *belong*. Child tracing is a process that seeks to transform relations of violence into relations of care and offers insight into a holistic approach to social repair at the very site of ongoing structural and cultural violence.

Conclusions

Speaking at the launch of the Global Survivors' Fund in October 2019, SRSG Pramila Patten recognized the historical significance of the creation of a survivor-centric mechanism designed to provide reparations and other forms of redress to survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. A survivor-centred approach, in her words, 'means giving voice and choice to survivors, restoring their agency, building their resilience and enshrining their experience on the historical record' (UN, 2019). She then hastened to add that such an approach also means resuming 'the quiet miracle of a normal life, which so many of us take for granted' (*Ibid*). In this article, we have taken note of this historical opportunity to advance a long impeded global agenda on children 'born of war', with due consideration for why they have yet to emerge as 'subjects' in their own right within national and international policy frameworks. When and where children 'born of war' are recognized, they do so as secondary victims; their particular victim status is rendered unintelligible given the complex politics of identity. The discrimination and hostility with which they are treated compound their limited opportunities, as many are caught in cycles of poverty and social displacement. Ongoing and cumulative, structural and cultural violence are pervasive and unattributable, further rendering the children's victim status elusive, given the limits in naming the wrong and the wrongdoer. Legal definitions of victimhood are narrow and limit the understanding of the complex ways that violence shapes one's life in and after the war. Thus, as Sanchez-Parra (2020) concludes in her consideration of children 'born of war' in Colombia in the 2011 Victim's and Land Restitution Law, even when they are recognized as a category, it is always in relation to the violation against the mother, and so, they remain 'unintelligible'.

We have suggested that a survivor-centred approach goes some way towards moving beyond such limitations. We have explored this in three ways: first, we argue it broadens the remit of the victim category beyond primary harm, to consider structural and cultural harm. As such, it recognizes that harm is not only ever perpetrated as a single act by a single individual, but also socially and cumulatively, impacting a child's sense of self and belonging. Second, a survivor-centred approach attends to the processes of social reconstruction within victim populations, and the kinds of othering practices through which a community comes to define itself, and through which harm to the child takes its form. Social recovery in this case is a process of self-identification, relationship building and entering into a public space of acknowledgement and engagement. Like SRSG Patten, we recognize 'the quiet miracle of a normal life', in the recovery of a sense of self, of voice, of acknowledgement, of meaningful relationships strained by war and of the imagining of a better future.

Third, a survivor-centred approach is potentially transformative when grounded in the lived experiences, relationships, and senses of justice and reparation held and acted upon by survivors. A shift from a victim-centred to survivor-centred approach moves the focus from providing reparation for a specific instance of harm to recognizing and addressing the complex lived realities of

survivors and thus rendering children 'born of war' both visible and as knowing, agentive subjects. Drawing on lived experience, a survivor-centred approach is grounded in the knowledge and agency of children 'born of war' as it is shaped by, and shapes, the process of social reconstruction after conflict, displacement, genocide or military occupation. We explored these claims through three brief case studies that draw on lived experience to highlight processes of self and community recovery as envisioned by youth and young adults and the potential it holds for building leadership, civic engagement and the ability to envision a different future. Policy frameworks and interventions that adopt a survivor-centred approach, then, may take cues from these emerging voices for change at the community and national levels.

Given the highly politicized settings in which most children 'born of war' grow up and live, supporting youth and adults who wish to either come together or to speak publicly about their story requires trust and relationship building. Working with local NGOs or community-based groups that have a pre-existing relationship and provide ongoing and culturally relevant counselling can help 'break the spell of silence' (Edström and Dolan, 2019). In their work with a male group for survivors of sexual violence, Ugandan NGO Refugee Law Project found that continued support to individuals and the formation of groups, in addition to the provision of networking opportunities, deepened trust and developed relationships; therapy became a form of activism (Edström et al., 2016) and group membership a form of self-recovery (Schulz, 2019). Like children 'born of war', male and female survivors endure 'ethical loneliness', and disclosure can lead to national fury, stigma, smear campaigns and social ejection from communities. Survivors may be unknown to each other. Yet, as is evident globally, such activism is possible when carefully considered and survivor led. A group of children 'born of war' from BiH are tracing processes through which they can come to know and come to terms with their identities (Takševa, 2017); Rwandan youth came together to participate in organized justice and reconciliation initiatives (Denov and Kahn, 2019; Eramian and Denov, 2018); and in Northern Uganda, children 'born of war' challenge communities to come together and work towards a better future for the children by seeking paternal recognition and relationships with their paternal clans.

As with any survivor group, people may choose to remain silent or hidden to protect themselves and their loved ones, but others do choose to speak, and researchers, NGOs and international organizations can facilitate this process. As the SRSGs cooperate to prevent and respond to the enduring risks and harms faced by women survivors and their children, as established in the UNSCR 2467 (2019), they face a challenge to document experiences globally and develop an action plan. Accordingly, it is important for them to start a conversation around children 'born of war' that centres on the lived experiences and agency of these children. A survivor-centred approach will go a long way to develop policy responses rooted in local contexts but reflective of shared global experiences. This could involve meeting with youth who have already started to speak out or supporting emerging groups of youth who are starting to find a voice and seek a space in which they can exchange their experiences. For some, they may be entering the public sphere to claim a place in existing mechanisms and seek recognition, while for others, it may be to act as

national bridges and peacemakers in divided societies, repairing broken social links. Within each approach, there is a possibility for children 'born of war' to find a place under the sun.

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