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“Action Counseling” Intervention for Families in Bosnia-Herzegovina

Mary Ellen Toffle^{a,b*}

^aUniversity of Messina, Piazza Pugliatti 1, 98122 Messina, Italy

^bUniversity of Pavia, Strada Nuova 65, 27100 Pavia, Italy

Abstract

The Bosnian War was one of the most destructive wars to civilian populations in the history of humanity. Bosnia-Herzegovina has been referred to as a “spectre of a lost future” (Kurtovic, 2014). Associazione Fabio Vita nel Mondo ONLUS (AFVM) is an Italian organization that has been carrying out humanitarian operations since 2003. It is fighting hard to eliminate that “spectre”. This paper reports the successful counseling work of the Associazione Fabio Vita nel Mondo in Konijc, (Bosnia-Herzegovina) which has prevented many children from going to orphanages. Both trained volunteers and professional counselors assist families. At this time all of the families in the program have been able to keep their children. Further expansion of the program is necessary to encompass other areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina and a larger team of local social workers should be developed.

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1. Introduction

The Bosnian War in the last decade of the 20th century will go down in history as one of the most destructive wars to civilian populations in the history of mankind. Various sources quote deaths at being between approximately 100,000 to 200,000; half of the population became refugees, an estimated total of two million (Hawton, 2009). There are conflicting reports on the actual number of deaths and displaced people. Reports range from 200,000 + dead, injured and missing to 156,500 civilian deaths (Burg & Shoup, 1999). Mass genocidal killings and rapes were the common occurrence, causing a huge psychic, social and spiritual wound that even today bleeds through into the

* Mary Ellen Toffle. Tel.: +39-328-114-0231.

E-mail address: mtoffle@unime.it

first and second generations after the war. Political debates on both sides challenge the numbers (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2009). All sides and all groups suffered incredible damage. This war has been labeled “the most devastating conflict in Europe since World War II (Hovitz & Catherwood, 2006). Burg and Shoup report that it is an accepted fact that the Bosnian War caused 350,000 recorded casualties including 97,207 deaths, 40% of whom were civilians. Of those killed the casualty report estimates that approximately 66% were Bosnian Muslims, 26% were Serbs, and 8% were Croats. In addition to those who lost their lives, countless more were traumatized in a program of torture, mass rape, forced labor and confinement in concentration camps (Research and Documentation Center, 2013; Center for Justice and Accountability, 2014). According to Burg and Shoup, the majority of reported victims were Bosnian Muslims (Burg & Shoup, 1999).

But even after 20 years, the wounds remain. Bosnia Herzegovina has been referred to as a “spectre of a lost future” (Kurtovic, 2014). Unemployment is rampant: it has been estimated to be at around 44% (Federal Office of Statistics, 2014). One area in which these wounds are glaringly apparent can be seen in the large numbers of children in orphanages and people confined to psychiatric hospitals because they are unable to function in the society. It has been said that the effect of the war on Bosnia “continues to haunt the blighted country-as a constant excuse for dysfunction, as a bitter memory, a psychic scar and a malaise” (Borger, 2012). It has also been observed that Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) resulting from war atrocities (rapes, torture, loss of parents and relatives, disruption, displacement) is one of the main problems facing the restructuring of Bosnia-Herzegovina today. Psychosocial impacts of uprooting and displacement: “Loss of place” syndrome, acute and chronic trauma, family disruption and problems of family reunification have all been identified as profound areas of need (Carballo et al., 2004). A recent study published by the Bosnia-Herzegovina Ministry of Health stated that “more than 60% of the Sarajevo population suffers from PTSD symptoms, while 73% have stress-related problems” (Dzidic, 2012).

Associazione Fabio Vita nel Mondo ONLUS (AFVM) is an Italian organization that has been carrying out humanitarian operations since 2003. It is fighting hard to eliminate that “spectre”. One of its most important and successful projects is that of assisting families in crisis in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Children in families that are unable to support them are sent to orphanages as a mandatory legal solution. Consequently it is imperative that families who are in danger of losing their own children receive immediate and ongoing assistance. Perhaps the most significant illness caused by the war is Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD). Often the prime breadwinner is suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome; and this is a debilitating disease which can strike victims of trauma associated with warfare, violence or abuse years after the event. PTSD was first recognized as a trauma/stress related disorder. It was found that PTSD can emerge soon after exposure to trauma or unexpectedly at a later date, sometimes years. And it can continue indefinitely. Studies from the Vietnam War revealed that 25 years later veterans still reported symptoms (Price, 2014). So strong were the negative effects of the Bosnian War that a declaration of the United Nations was issued citing a state of emergency in the mental health area (Boley, 2007). Despite the fact that the war in Bosnia was brought to a close in 1995, war-related psychological problems are still evident today (Mollica et al., 2001) and in many cases have assumed a degree of chronicity that is having serious implications for societal as well as personal reconstruction (Carballo et al., 2004).

The following effects were noted as having a strong impact on Bosnian family life: decreased ability to feel and decreased involvement in significant life activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) which result in critical family problems. Some of these problems include alcoholism, drug abuse, inability to find or hold down a job, broken families, all ending in children being put into orphanages.

2. Problem Statement

“Saving a lost generation one family at a time” could summarize the activity of Associazione Fabio Vita nel Mondo ONLUS (AFVM) which has been working in Bosnia-Herzegovina since 2003. Humanitarian convoys of food, clothing and supplies were the first step but it became obvious that this was not enough to make a significant impact on the devastated society that remained after the war. The activity performed has been appropriately named “Action Counseling” because it combines regular counseling and social work techniques with specific action targeted at helping the families and individuals work out solutions for their problems. It is a uniquely designed model developed and implemented by AFVM to assist families at the point of breaking down to find the strength to stay together and reconstruct their lives.

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