PeaceWoman Nusreta Sivac: winner of the Foundation for Freedom and Human Rights prize

"Justice can only be achieved through solidarity between as many women as possible"

Bosnian peace activist Nusreta Sivac was one of the 1000 PeaceWomen nominated for the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize. On 7 November 2021, she received the prize from the Stiftung Freiheit und Menschenrechte, the Swiss Foundation for Freedom and Human Rights. Nusreta Sivac's work has been "dedicated to the struggle for truth and justice, especially for women who have experienced violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as worldwide."

As a prisoner in the Omarska camp, Nusreta Sivac experienced two months of torture, hunger, beatings and rape during the war in Bosnia. Sometimes she wished that she could die. But then she thought about the future. "If I survive this, hopefully one day I will bear witness to it, and something good will come out of it." After the war ended in 1995, she did indeed bear witness: thanks to her, the man who raped her was convicted. However, her commitment went even further. She collected testimonies from women all over Bosnia. Today, it is also thanks to women like Nusreta Sivac that sexualised violence is classified as a war crime under international law.

We interviewed her on the occasion of the award ceremony on 7 November 2021.

Many years have passed since the Bosnian war. When you look back on the years since the war ended, what are you most proud of?

I am proud of my tireless activism in spreading the truth and fighting for justice. My testimonies have helped convict many war criminals at the Hague Tribunal and the BiH (Bosnia and Herzegovina) Court, including the person who mistreated me in the Omarska camp. Then there is also my contribution to the definition of rape as a war crime in international law and the many recognitions and awards that have honoured my dedicated work. I am particularly proud of the civil lawsuit I initiated with other women against the now convicted war criminal Radovan Karadzic in the New York courts. His conviction in New York was a great historical and moral victory for us victims, although there has been no compensation for the victims to date.
What is still a disappointment to you today?
I am disappointed that the environment in which I live has not yet distanced itself from war crimes against non-Serbs. The verdicts for the most serious crimes against humanity and international humanitarian law are still being contested and there is denial that any crimes were committed. The local community does not allow for the creation of a monument to the 102 children killed in Prijedor, but instead erects a monument on the site of the former Trnopolje camp that humiliates and insults the victims. I am concerned about the current complex and uncertain political situation in BiH. It could threaten peace and provoke new conflicts that would be devastating for the population, with potential far-reaching consequences.

Sexualised violence against women in war has been considered a war crime and a crime against humanity for more than ten years. What has actually changed for women in war and conflict zones since then?
Unfortunately, we are still witnessing the suffering of women in war and conflict zones, and the definition of sexual violence against women has not prevented this type of crime in general. In BiH, female victims of sexual violence have received certain rights that alleviate their situation. However, this applies only in localities of the Federation of BiH, not in Republika Srpska.

What would have to change today for women in war zones to have greater assurance of safety?
It is difficult to find a universal pattern for preventing violence against women. Some cases are slow to reach the public, or do so only after they have escalated to the point of having reached unpredictable consequences. Regressive policies that do not accept the richness of diversity in national, cultural, religious and sociological terms use violence against women as a weapon to achieve war aims. Sanctions must be much harsher.

You have collected the testimonies of women in Bosnia who experienced violence during the war or who witnessed violence against women. What significance do these testimonies have for coming to terms with Bosnia’s history? For the future of Bosnia?
I made contacts and recorded the testimonies of many women from BiH while I was still in exile. The history of my country is written through these stories, stories which bear witness to the horrors of war and help to identify the problems that each woman faces individually, finding the best way to help them.
PeaceWomen Across the Globe works with women and women’s organisations in conflict-affected countries, including Colombia, Nepal and the Philippines. With our partners there, we have published a report based on the experiences of conflict-affected women and the sharing of those experiences. What advice would you give to the women and civil society organisations there in terms of coming to terms with violence against women during armed conflict – and in terms of demanding justice for these women?

Women themselves need to be clear about what they want, work on their recovery, and accept what is best for them in order to transform severe traumatic experiences into something useful for them and for society. Justice is slow and can only be achieved through persistent commitment and solidarity between as many women and organisations as possible – these must be adapted to the specifics of the country in which the women operate.

You yourself have experienced violence and rape. What advice would you give to affected women to heal not only their bodies but also their minds?

Professional help, sharing experiences, talking, writing, getting involved in different activities and so finding your own preferences can greatly help women victims heal not only their bodies but also the psychological trauma.

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