

medica mondiale's concept of trauma and human rights work

medica mondiale is a very humanitarian project that was initiated in the right place at the right time. Its work will have a place in our history. It is like giving the blind eyes to see, the deaf ears to hear, and the mute language. I hope that this project will have a long life in our country. (a staff member of *medica* Kosovo)

Sexualised war violence is an attack on the intimate self. Many different factors such as tabooing, marginalisation and even threats by the family, society at large or sensationalised press reports mean that women cannot speak about what they have experienced, thereby suffering their whole life under the mental and physical injuries. The daily violence against women is made worse by the destruction of social structures, by poverty and inadequate medical care. During many years of work in regions of war and conflict, medica mondiale, in cooperation with women on the ground, has developed a holistic concept that aims to support women in overcoming their traumatic experiences, to enhance social integration and the active participation by women in processes of social change and also protects them from further violence.

Long-term Support

The destructive social and psychological consequences of sexualised war violence can often last for many years. Sometimes, trauma symptoms can re-emerge in the next generation. Also, many women often only gain access to support services at a later point in time. This is why *medica mondiale* encourages the development of sustainable local support structures for women who have experienced violence. In order to guarantee their long-term success – particularly after international development aid has left the country – *medica mondiale* supports existing organisations or women's groups, or develops its own projects that are handed over to local staff as soon as possible. One basic principle in this is to support women all over the world to go their own way – individually and in the community – to overcome traumatic experiences of violence and to prevent it from re-occurring. ■

Holistic Approach

Rape and other forms of violence have life-impacting consequences on a mental, physical, spiritual and social level. In addition, a feeling of shame, stigmatisation and the danger of being expelled from their own family



An Afghan psychologist provides women with support © Lizette Potgieter/*medica mondiale*

all lead to women only being able to accept low threshold support services that will not lead to further stigmatisation. Therefore, *medica mondiale* offers a wide range of support services: medical treatment and consultation, psycho-social or psycho-therapeutic support, vocational training and income-generating activities as well as legal advice. Assistance is offered in the *medica mondiale* counselling centres but also directly in the communities, for example through a mobile gynaecological ambulance. ■

Adaptation to local conditions

The context of *medica mondiale's* trauma and human rights work varies considerably according to the conflict region. *medica mondiale's* regionally adapted working approach depends on the situation on the

ground. Therefore, before a project is initiated, the extent, consequences and the specific perception of sexualised and other forms of violence against women and girls as well as existing support approaches in the region are discussed and analysed with key local organisations, groups and individuals. ■



Women in Kosova still fighting for war pension © Sybille Fezer/*medica mondiale*

Women's Rights Work

The continuing absence of security and permanence of new violence against women (domestic violence, social marginalisation, sexual exploitation by aid workers and peace-keeping soldiers) is typical for post-war and conflict regions. This is where the connection to *medica mondiale's* political human rights work is to be found, which demands real security for women and girls as a precondition for effective trauma work. The mental and social consequences of sexualised violence always need to be seen within the context of massive human rights violations, out of which they arose. In order to support war-traumatised women, *medica mondiale* therefore also targets the social and political framework conditions, conducts public relation work on the subject of violence against women and intervenes politically for women's rights. Individual services and public education and sensitisation work are combined as a coordinated dual strategy with the goal of supporting traumatised women in an optimal way and to enforce their rights. ■

Justice

War rape is a serious human rights violation. Despite the shocking magnitude, crimes against women are still treated as secondary or are sometimes even denied and to a large degree the perpetrators go unpunished. Without an official acknowledgement and prosecution of the crimes committed against them, there can be no reparation and

compensation for women across the world – not to mention justice.

medica mondiale denounces these human rights violations publicly and demands the prosecution of sexualised war violence. During the past years, *medica mondiale* has in particular accompanied the work of the international courts of justice in a critical fashion and has persistently campaigned for the protection of traumatised witnesses and for an appropriate handling of such cases. ■

Creating existential security

Faced with economic hardship and grief for family members, most women in post-war countries need first and foremost the feeling of existential security. Only then can they start dealing with and overcoming the violence and horror of the war. Support in practical everyday life struggles is therefore placed at the onset of the psycho-social counselling and support of the women. Every project first seeks to secure the material security of its clients – either through *medica mondiale* itself or by referring them to other aid organisations. The women are supplied with food, blankets and clothes, and the *medica mondiale* staff help them to



Women take part in the skills training of our partner organisation PAIF in DR Congo © Karin Griese/*medica mondiale*

homes. If women are acutely threatened by violence, they can find temporary safety in the women shelters of *medica mondiale*. ■

Creating understanding and commitment

The sensitisation of the families and communities, within health care institutions and schools, of the police, judiciary and religious leaders is crucial for the success of *medica mondiale's* work. The aim is to create a basis

for a competent support in solidarity with women and girls who have experienced violence and have been traumatised and to build functioning networks to prevent further violence. ■

Community-oriented approach

One of the goals of *medica mondiale* is to ultimately place the responsibility for the support of women and girls who have experienced violence and for prevention measures within the communities themselves. Therefore, *medica mondiale* cooperates closely with support groups or other dedicated community members on the ground. They receive training so that they can be approached as a person of trust, can offer initial support, can refer women to *medica mondiale* and also contribute to the reintegration of the violence-affected women in the community. ■



Monika Hauser at the opening of the women's centre in Fish Town/Liberia © Sybille Fezer/*medica mondiale*

Training specialists and building support networks

In order to overcome experiences of violence, it is crucial that the victims receive trauma-appropriate support after the events. Frequently, a retraumatisation can occur in the context of medical treatment or in dealing with government agencies and institutions. For *medica mondiale* therefore one of the most urgent tasks is to enhance the competence of specialists and occupational groups who have to deal with traumatised women and girls in their work – for example midwives, doctors, policemen and lawyers – through organising trainings and support networks.. ■

Trauma-sensitive counselling and support

Psychological trauma destroys the feeling of security and damages basic trust. Personal

boundaries are violated, and the own self-esteem is undermined, and an overwhelming feeling of helplessness is created. Apart from the therapists and psycho-social counsellors, all staff members of the local *medica mondiale* organisation (doctors, midwives, lawyers) need to be able to identify signs of traumatisation and of experience of violence even if the women do not talk directly about their experience, as the feeling of shame and the fear of stigmatisation prevents many women from doing so. In the various counselling settings – medical treatment, help in finding work or living quarters, legal advice – staff can engage with their clients in a sensitive and empathetic way, thereby making it possible for women to confide in them and to receive additional support for dealing with their traumata, perhaps by being referred to the counsellors. It is already a first success if, in the midst of adverse living conditions, the staff member is able to offer the clients a little bit more security and help in overcoming their social isolation by material support, medical treatment and attentive dialogue. ■

medica mondiale's psycho-social trauma work

In our local projects, *medica mondiale* only works with local psycho-social counsellors. In many countries, psycho-social and trauma-specific work methods are almost unknown, and there are therefore very few trained specialists on the ground. At the same time, there are usually no functioning traditional “healing rituals” or other approaches for women. This is why *medica mondiale* offers intensive further training to all of their local staff and invites them to share their experiences with colleagues from other *medica mondiale* projects.

Ultimately, *medica mondiale* develops appropriate approaches for psychosocial support and trauma work together with the local members of staff. The aim of the psychosocial support and of the psychotherapy is to support the women in coming to terms with their traumatic experiences and to give them the chance – despite the experience of degrading and destructive violence – to live independently and securely within social surroundings that acknowledge their suffering but also their will to survive and their strength. This also involves

the recreation of their self-esteem, the reduction of trauma symptoms and the removal of social isolation. The affected women should not feel totally dominated by the past and their experiences of violence but should be able to focus their attention again on the now and the future. ■

Psychosocial work in counselling groups

One very successful approach is the psychosocial group work, which is particularly successful because the participants can discuss their problems within the collective and support each other. Crucial is a growing understanding of the connection between human rights violations and trauma symptoms as well as the connection between physical and mental problems, the reduction of trauma symptoms, the learning of new social skills and the building of friendships and informal networks. Depending on the training focus of the counsellors, methods from cognitive or behavioural therapy, elements from hypnotherapy (e.g. guided imagination), and/or body psychotherapy or creative therapeutic approaches are used. ■

Individual psychosocial counselling and therapeutic work

In addition to the groups, individual counselling sessions are also offered. For many women, this is the only setting in which they can speak about their painful experiences. For women who are acutely threatened by violence, the initial focus is on crisis intervention and psychological first aid, which is then followed during the counselling with the recreation of security and with stabilisation.

Depending on the crisis context, the training level of the counsellor and the specific life situation of the affected woman, it can be possible to deal with traumatic experiences therapeutically – this can take months and years. The therapeutic process can lead to a healing result if the client is able to accept her traumatic experiences as part of her life experience and to develop a new perspective for her life. In this context, the official acknowledgement and prosecution of sexualised violence as a serious human rights violation is an important factor to re-establish justice for the survivors. ■



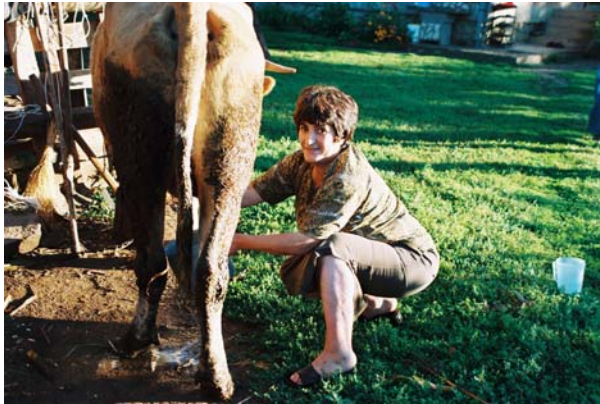
The mobile gynaecological ambulance of *medica Kosova* offers support in Kosovarian villages © Christel Becker-Rau

Help for the helpers

In war-, conflict-, and post-war regions, people working in helping vocations face great challenges. They themselves have hardly any possibilities to deal with their terrible experiences and to grieve for their lost ones. Dealing with traumatised women can lead to a great uncertainty. Helpers feel overwhelmed and can no longer offer appropriate support – they often go beyond their own boundaries in order to fulfil the needs of their clients. Therefore, *medica mondiale* offers courses for the staff members of the local partner projects and for other specialists that deal with the consequences of working with psychological trauma and violence to oneself and that offer strategies for preventing burnout and vicarious traumatisation. ■

Regaining control over ones own life and creating new perspectives

In addition to the support of stabilisation and, in the best case scenario, healing trauma, the development of perspectives of economic survival is essential. To this end, a combination of psycho-social counselling and trainings has been proven and tested. The stigma of war rape and the death of relatives make it difficult for women in the post-war period to return to a life without violence and repression. After the war, many women are confronted by poverty and some are forced by pure existential need into survival-prostitution, become victims of trafficking or live in exploitative relations of dependency – a fate that means the terrible continuation of the sexualised violence that these women experienced during the war.



A Kosovarian woman with her new cow in Dobrosh © Sybille Fezer/*medica mondiale*

medica mondiale considers the chance of a new life in dignity as a human right that according to gender equality also applies to women. An important pillar of *medica mondiale*'s project work is therefore the development of employment possibilities for women. *medica mondiale* offers alphabetisation courses and vocational trainings and includes women in measures to create employment. Women should be able to secure their livelihood independently. In this process, *medica mondiale* also supports women in their own emancipation to resist patriarchal role models. This also helps recovery from traumatic experiences because it is connected to regaining control over one's own life.

Long-term success is achieved – as in the case of female Kosovarian farmers in *medica Kosova* projects – when the women are able to secure an independent income for themselves and their children and can thereby develop a self-determined life. ■

Women as initiators of social change

When women are strengthened they can play a positive model role deep into society – setting examples and creating hope for other women, and challenging men. But overcoming individual and collective war traumata and achieving real peace for a post-war society requires a reflection on violent gender relations. A public democratisation cannot really be sustainable without an inner democratisation as well. *medica mondiale* awards women a key role in civil conflict management; with their life experiences they bring with them

competencies that are predestined for understanding and reconciliation. And because the systematic exclusion of women endangers the sustainability of peace accords, *medica mondiale* supports women in struggling for their right to political participation in the reconstruction and peace processes. ■