

BREAKING THE SILENCE

A rehabilitation centre in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not only helping traumatized war victims, but is also contributing to building a lasting peace, the centre's director **JASNA ZECEVIC** told participants at the International Conference on Health and Human Rights in Peru.

• Women concerned about safety and trauma founded Vive Zene, a centre for therapy and rehabilitation in Tuzla. In 1994 two women's groups, from Tuzla and Dormund in Germany, combined their efforts to establish a centre that would provide a safe haven for women and children - the most vulnerable victims of the devastating war that raged unabated from 1992 to 1995.

Since then, the centre has been transformed. Today Vive Zene continues to provide psychosocial treatment to women and children, who suffer from trauma as a result of physical and sexual torture. It has also extended its services to men and raises awareness about psychosocial issues in the community. Recently a new research section has been established and advancements have also been made in the monitoring and evaluation of treatment.

The centre has adopted a multidisciplinary approach whereby patients are offered psychosocial help, medical assistance and legal counselling. Vive Zene's goal is to minimize the effects of trauma and related disorders for victims that have been tortured, raped or abused, and help them with their emotional healing. *The psychosocial model is based on the understanding that the healing of trauma is a multidimensional, long-term process that involves working on the individual, fostering the support of the local community as well as working with the broader society.*

Vive Zene services are client-oriented. The psychosocial protection program is implemented by a multidisciplinary team that consists of psychologists, social workers, nursery school teachers, social workers, teachers, a doctor, a nurse, a physiotherapist and a lawyer.

Following assessment and admission to the centre or outpatient facility, the multidisciplinary team decides what kind of assistance or treatment is needed and then creates an individual's 'recovery plan' and appoints a

staff member to be responsible for each case.

As well as connecting disciplines that function both within the team and externally, we assess the connection between the social and cultural background of a client and the kind of treatment services a client needs. After a client is admitted to a program and before a care plan is made, the client's entire background is analysed: family ties, education and place of residence, for the purpose of adapting the support plan to the client's needs. It is very important for us to take into account the environment from where a client comes. In some cases it was not possible for us to start psychotherapy or counselling before the client could understand the basic principles and the meaning of psychosocial assistance and support.

Psychosocial treatment also includes post-care. The team will continue to monitor the client after the treatment and will assess whether the level of emotional stability achieved will be sustained in the environment to which the client returns. Post-care is very important in our work because it supplements what we call psychosocial community care.

The psychosocial model includes an analysis of the environment a client comes from, the adaptations that will need to take place, the implementation of the recovery plan, and finally the constant monitoring of the client.

The therapeutic work was focused on what we call 'stationary work', that is, when victims stay for a minimum of six months at the centre. Now stationary treatment is only limited to emergency situations and does not exceed two months. Ambulatory treatment is offered on a broader scale. The therapeutic work is also linked to community activities. Some patients need stationary treatment but not as a replacement of normal life. Thus shorter stays are important and make the return to society much easier. Our work involves a combination of protecting the victim,

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dealing with his or her family, and accompanying the victim for a long time after he or she has left the centre. At some point, staff at the centre will work with family members, normally with the husband and children of the victim and deal with the connection between past traumatising and current problems.

For some time now Vive Zene has also engaged in community work. We operate with a belief that efforts made towards the reconstruction of a safe, democratic, and economically viable society will benefit individuals struggling with their healing processes. Therefore three levels of intervention have been integrated into this psychosocial model. Each requires specific objectives, activities and outcomes.

The first level involves assisting rape and torture victims to heal their inner wounds. This is implemented through the psychosocial program. The second level is about rebuilding trust and social connectedness within local communities and it is achieved by working within the camps for internally displaced as well as in local communities. This is followed by rebuilding society through advocacy, documentation, education and research.

Assisting victims and their families to face the past and overcome it isn't quite as challenging as working with the community. To get torture victims recognized by the community or respected as victims of rape is very difficult. As a result, victims live their lives in a shadow because they carry 'the sin' on their shoulders. In other words, after years of silence, family, friends and other people who are close to them, blame the victims for the aggression and humiliation inflicted on them by the perpetrators. Some women then start to wonder: "Maybe it is true and in some ways I may be guilty ... I should not have been on that spot at that moment..."

Over the years the centre has had a beneficial impact on the lives of

thousands of people who have confirmed to us there is a great need for a public and open dialogue about the country's past.

Breaking the silence in a society engulfed in so many problems may not be an easy task. However it may be a decisive turning point if we are to put an end to the vicious circle in which Bosnia-Herzegovina society seems to be trapped. This is due mainly to the slow pace of government reforms that are necessary if we are to meet the needs of marginalized and vulnerable groups and politicians' indifference to these groups and society's inability to make its own decisions. All these factors contribute to keeping the country in a state of on-going crisis that has lasted for almost a decade.

While discussions about the consequences of torture from the war are held among health professionals, they are not taking place among the politicians responsible for rebuilding and developing the country. According to the experience in other conflict zones and research undertaken worldwide, it is well known that ignoring what happened during the war could lead to renewed violence.

Health professionals working with torture victims are concerned about the conspiracy of silence that exists in Bosnia today. As a result, Vive Zene is facilitating public discussion and roundtable debates about the effects of torture. It is also conducting research and producing documentation in an effort to break the silence and to educate people about how to deal with the past. Through our educational work at a community level, the centre is contributing to the prevention of future conflicts.

Over the years Vive Zene became gradually involved in community development activities with the most neglected communities in Bosnia -- those who live in camps for displaced persons. Initially staff members went to the camps to identify needs. They provided medical assistance,

worked with children and facilitated therapeutic groups. Although these services were always welcomed we soon realized they didn't necessarily empower people. It became clear to us our activities needed to focus more on the empowerment of communities to equip them to solve their own problems and gradually become self-sufficient.

This has been a challenging task because traditionally people were not used to taking their own problems into their own hands. Quite the contrary, they are used to having the state providing services and the structures for public order.

Deprived of permanent safety, displaced people have been marginalized in the camps for quite some time. Theoretically residents have a right to go back home. Some of them can go back. Others can't because the political situation is not safe enough or because their homes have been destroyed. Many have been living in this provisional space for over 15 years. They are now exiles in their own country. They neither belong to where they came from nor are they integrated into their new living spaces. Vive Zene has been trying to help these people develop perspectives on their own lives and on their future so that they can start facing their own problems.

Our work in the camps started out with small activities like setting up a football club, a men's group, or helping people paint their own houses. It has continued through group work to empower people to make decisions, whether they stay or return. Visits to Srebrenica have been organized and some collective reconstruction has begun. All this has not changed the basic misery faced by the internally displaced, but it has offered a starting point. Community development work involves reconciliation, counselling, confidence building and reconstruction; by building on internal and external support structures and closing the ethnic gaps.

Similar work has been done with other local communities and the focus has gradually developed from offering psychosocial services to developing processes for self-empowerment and facilitating social spaces for reconciliation. Now Bosnia has teams like Vive Zene that integrate psychological and community activities into a single approach. Vive Zene has taken the leadership in training other professionals and coaching other institutions doing similar work. In that sense it is also contributing to building peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In some instances Vive Zene has filled the gap left by the state, which is incapable or unwilling to address the needs of disadvantaged people. Lasting peace will only be possible if the silence is broken, if victims are recognized and the voices of the marginalized are heard. Staff members at Vive Zene have been listening to these voices for so many years.

Dealing with the past is not only a question of having the legal, political or economic institutions and structures in place, but also about the way a state deals with the most vulnerable members of its society and about acknowledging and listening to people's emotions and experiences. ●

