



*The Right Livelihood Award 2008*

*Acceptance Speech by*

*Monika Hauser*

*Dec 8<sup>th</sup>, 2008*

Dear Madam Speaker, dear Recipients, honorable Guests, Members of Parliament, your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Friends,

It is a great pleasure to receive this award today. To me it means the recognition of fifteen years of unwavering commitment without which we at *medica mondiale* would not have been able to do our work, and to do it in the face of innumerable daily obstacles. I thank the jury for this unique honor. And I thank my family as well as my colleagues all over the world for holding onto our common vision to make this a better world for women and girls to live in.

We were able to accompany tens of thousands of traumatized women on their path towards reclaiming their lives. As I am addressing you today I do not stand here alone. With me in my thoughts are the women from Eastern Congo raped by rebels or government soldiers; the 12-year-old Afghan girl in the blue burka, sold to an old man by her own father; the Bosnian woman testifying against her rapist in The Hague, only to be humiliated anew inside or outside the courtroom.

In 1993, my deeply felt bond with women and girls whose dignity had been spurned led me to Central Bosnia during the war. Faced with the huge extent of sexualized violence practiced in that war it was inconceivable to me that the organization we would found later did not yet exist.

I had simply followed an inner calling. As a gynecologist-to-be I was looked upon as a troublemaker because of the very actions for which you are honoring me today. To give you a better idea of what I mean: at the time, there was little space in German hospitals and German mainstream medicine for empathic support for patients, least of all for pregnant women who were HIV-positive drug addicts, for women who had been raped, or

for old women still suffering from the trauma of World War II. There also was no space for somebody like me who did not want to accept such patriarchal power structures and their reproduction by the medical apparatus.

In Bosnia the war took place before the eyes of the global public and all of us participated in it through the media. Reports about mass rapes multiplied but the media focus was on the individually raped woman, not on the underlying structure. In different forms and to different extent rape and sexualized torture are part of every war. They always have strategic significance, regardless of whether they were explicitly planned, tacitly encouraged, or merely tolerated. The sexualized enslavement of women and girls – for example during World War II in Europe and Asia, or in several contemporary wars in Africa – serves both to boost the morale of one's own fighters and to terrorize the enemy.

Sexualized violence, everywhere and always, is destruction and the exertion of power over the immediate victim. In war, the destructive potential of sexualized violence is multiplied and can culminate at any moment in triumphant displays of power over the other side.

Unfortunately, society at home almost always continues the work of the adverse rapists. Communities ostracize raped women and girls as blemish of masculine/national honor or force them to remain silent if they want to survive socially. The non-recognition of rape as a form of torture and grave human rights violation constitutes a continuation of the violent act. Both the sexualized violent act and the subsequent social exclusion of the victim rest on the conscious or subconscious patriarchal creed of men's ownership over women's bodies. Thus, an attack on women turns into an attack on male property and honor.

Not to draw premature conclusions, this non-recognition of rape as a grave human rights violation and the associated social ostracism of women are not unique to Africa. Take, for example, the extreme under-reporting of rapes in societies with formal gender equality. Or the fact that British soldiers stationed in Kenya enjoy until this day impunity for having raped hundreds of Samburu women, just as many UN soldiers and international aid

workers sexually exploit the precarious circumstances particularly of African, Asian and Balkan women and girls literally without any shame.

Apart from that, the consequences of sexualized violence in today's African wars reach to Europe's doorstep. Women and girls who try to escape from violence often end up in open or clandestine prostitution in Western cities. This lucrative business at their expense is possible because there are enough male clients who neither look nor want to see.

From the very beginning *medica mondiale* – above and beyond providing professional support – has defined its mission as bringing women back into the centre of society. We wanted to contribute to the efforts to lift the taboo surrounding rape in war and to outlaw the practice. There was no universal strategy, no established professional manual for treating victims of war rape; we always had to develop our approach anew in a given context.

In the beginning this meant twenty professional Bosnian women at “Medica Zenica” – a project which has been autonomous for a number of years now – and a handful of activists in Germany. Today *medica mondiale* has grown into a mid-sized enterprise: 29 staff at the head office in Cologne, about 130 volunteers, almost 100 local staff in projects in Kosova, Albania, Afghanistan and Liberia. In many additional countries we support partner organizations, for example in Guatemala, Indonesia, India, Uganda, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

I would like to take this opportunity to introduce those colleagues from our projects who are here today:

Anita Varney from *medica mondiale* Liberia

Humaira Rasuli from *medica mondiale* Afghanistan

Veprora Shehu and Zejnete Dylatahu from *medica* Kosova

Neta Lohja from *medica* Tirana in Albania

Sabiha Husic from *Medica Zenica* in Bosnia

and I would like to ask all *medica mondiale* women to stand up briefly.

I am particularly glad that Immaculée Birhaheka, the founder of our partner organisation PAIF in Goma, honors me with her presence here as well. Like many other activists in conflict zones she is always in danger. While supporting women every day, she herself has to fear for her life because she is one of the brave who don't compromise in their fight for women's rights and who fearlessly name the perpetrators and their crimes.

I would like to use the presence of Ms. Birhaheka as well as of Ms. Rasuli from Kabul to ask a few questions:

Why do international decision makers not see it as their primary responsibility to effectively protect women like Ms. Birhaheka and Ms. Rasuli and more generally all civil and human rights defenders?

What is the value of UN resolution 1325, demanding the participation of women in all peace processes, and of resolution 1820, defining rape as an impediment of international peace and security, if these resolutions are not implemented immediately and effectively?

And why don't the UN and governments listen more to women like the Congolese women's rights activists who again only recently, in a collective outcry for help, appealed to the international community?

Gender is a social and cultural construction. It takes concepts, policies, and power to avoid being trapped by it. Thousands of feminists and women activist around the world contribute to ways out of the gender trap for the benefit of all. However, we need allies in governments to implement these policies and turn them into universal standards. In this regard Sweden sets an international example. I bet it would not happen here like it did in Germany that a senior envoy/diplomat asks me whether 1820 is a Cognac brand! This envoy was formerly responsible for human rights at the Foreign Office in Berlin. It would have suited him to understand that as such he was also responsible for human beings called women.

Women need to be present at every negotiation table, not as token women but in critical mass. Instead, for instance in Afghanistan, women's suffering is exploited to legitimize wars, but women are excluded from building their own new and peaceful society. Men still have the power to exclude women from these processes. Women are not considered; their realities are ignored and more often than not simply forgotten.

Asha Hagi has given us a superb example when she formed an alliance across communal divides with other women so that they could participate in the peace negotiations in Somalia as a new sixth clan. Thus they were the first in their country to demonstrate their enormous capacity for peace, quite different from their men. I am delighted that this very capacity is honored by the Alternative Nobel Prize. In this way the award can honor the kind of competencies ignored, among others, by this year's Nobel Peace Prize winner.

Gender is not a synonym for women. Gender refers to a hierarchical system of relationships based on gender stereotypes that throttle the free development of all individuals like a straightjacket, of men, women, lesbians, gays, and transgendered persons. We have known long before Abu Ghraib that men, too, are rapable and would benefit from a serious revision of gender relations.

The US trauma therapist Judith Herman put it like this: "Even if the body heals eventually, the psychological scars will have lifelong destructive effects". For women traumatized in war this means that threat continues to be experienced as real even long after the external cause of the threat has ceased to exist. This holds in particular for women in post-war areas where the overall living conditions are dire and re-traumatizing. In this regard I feel especially for the women of Srebrenica: they cannot rest until the remains of their men have been found. Every day they are eaten up by feelings of guilt because they have survived. Much remains to be done for their inner peace.

Women who were raped in war learn that they will be ostracized politically and socially and that their violations are still taboo, which constitutes an additional traumatization.

Through their isolation they lose contact with the world. The professional support of our local *medica mondiale* colleagues gives them the strength to return back to life and into society. The holistic approach of *medica mondiale* with our political women's rights work and multidisciplinary practice enables women and girls to leave their status and identity as victims, to regain agency, to proudly claim their right to reshape society and to develop their own perspective of a new life in dignity and self-determination.

The support of these processes is not a question of charity or solidarity. It is a question of political responsibility, because we all live in the same world – a responsibility that all of us bear.