Silence as a means of controlling the explosive nature of sexual violence

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Introduction
As a medical anthropologist I am doing research among refugee women in the Netherlands from Afghanistan, Bosnia, and South-Sudan who experienced sexual violence as part of the war in their countries or during their flight. I have chosen those three different cultural and religious groups in order to compare the differences and similarities in meaning production and in the ways the women cope with their experiences. Please note that for most women “sexual violence” is another word for rape. Other forms of sexual violence are not always considered to be sexual violence but rather torture.

The main purpose of my qualitative research is to develop a theoretical perspective on how women, individually and as part of a group, negotiate their meaning production and health care strategies. As it happens, the main coping strategy of the refugee women is to keep their experiences of sexual violence secret. This is not really news, because we all know that women tend to keep their intimate experiences secret. What I hope to make clear, however, is that their silence is not only because of the cultural taboo of sexual violence and the shame it produces. Their silence is also the result of a complex and dynamic reality in the daily life of the women in which they often experience confusing or contradictory cultural norms and expectations between their culture of origin and culture of refuge.

To try to clarify this I will use the ecological model as a framework for understanding why women keep experiences of sexual violence secret (Miller and Rasco 2004).
levels and although this picture seems very simple, the dynamics between all these levels and the impact of these dynamics on the women is very complex. Their lives on all these levels are insecure and vulnerable, the more so because the traditional support mechanisms often break down when people migrate. Furthermore, traditional notions do not give them the flexibility they need to find support for their problems. I will show that sexual violence has an impact on all these levels and that all these levels influence the way women cope with sexual violence—and that the best way to cope, according to them, is to keep silent.

**Silencing on the individual level**

All the women I have spoken with told me that sexual violence was the worst thing they could experience. Many women suffer from symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, of severe depression and/or of anxiety disorder, but they are not always able to reveal the source of these symptoms.

Women struggle to interpret their experiences meaningfully and to find an answer as to why this has happened to them. Some women think that God or Allah has punished them for not behaving like a good woman and they feel guilty for has what happened. But most women cannot find an answer. Some of them think that they are simply guilty of having been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Because personal identity is very closely linked to sexual identity, sexual violence is also an assault on the very core of a person’s self, and not only on the personal self but also on the relational identity. The identity of people in many communities in (for instance) Africa and Asia is not experienced as an ‘individual self’ (as it is in western countries) but is characterised by a sense of a ‘family self’(Roland in Ramanujam 1992: 126-127). That means that their self is experienced as the product of an intense emotional relationship with the family. It is not ‘I’ that is at stake but ‘WE’. In a society with a ‘we-identity’, the consequences of misbehaviour by a relative, a brother, sister or child, fall as much on the relatives as on the person who behaves badly. So if my brother misbehaves I am also called to account. I cannot say, ‘Oh it’s my brother; I can’t help it’. I am also responsible. Gender relations and notions of sexuality—such as chastity, virginity, honour, shame, guilt—are felt and expressed in the context of women’s families and even in the context of their social group. Women feel responsible for the effect on their relatives of the sexual violence they have experienced. They try not to tell anyone, in order to protect their own selves and the selves and social positions of their relatives.

Like all people, the women I studied have internalised notions of what a good woman is and how a good woman has to behave. Most women who have experienced sexual violence struggle with those internalised and embodied cultural notions of sexuality and femininity and the idea of being responsible for what happened to them. This makes many women deeply depressed and riddled with anxieties.

One Afghan woman told me:

I am 45 years old now and as long as I can remember and with everything I can feel in my body and think in my mind I can say that being raped is by far the worst thing a person can experience. It is even worse than dying.

Another Afghan refugee woman in the Netherlands who was raped by the Taliban avoids all contact with other refugees from Afghanistan. She doesn’t even dare to look in a mirror, be
cause feels that she is already dead. She tries to repress her memories so she can go on living, and in order to manage this she keeps silent.

The next aspect on the individual level is embodiment. Horrific violence, like sexual violence, is not only stored in people’s minds but also in their bodies. Sometimes people do not have words for their experiences or do not remember or only partly remember, but their experiences are stored in their body memory(Schreuder 2001). This is the implicit, unconscious part of memory, not always open for conscious reflection. One refugee woman from Bosnia I spoke with has hardly any memories of the rape she experienced, but she continues to suffer from the intrusive smell of her perpetrators, a mix of the sweat of unwashed men, alcohol and cigarettes that makes her very often vomit. Since people feel the need to keep silent, and since they do not dare to talk about their experiences, the experiences can find their way into mental disorders; but these bodily memories can also be expressed in physical complaints. And women do not always make a connection between these complaints and their experiences of sexual violence.

Many women think that the best thing they could do is commit suicide. Many women from Afghanistan, for example, feel that it is better to die than to be raped. One Afghan refugee woman told me:

You can only die once, but if you are raped by men then you die every day, because afterwards you get a very bad name, and everybody looks down on you and no one wants to talk with you. I could not bear such a painful life, so I could not stay with my family. I fled and became a refugee, but sometimes I think it would have been better to commit suicide.

My informants report many cases of women in Afghanistan who committed suicide after being raped. And most refugee women, whether from Afghanistan, Bosnia or South-Sudan, have periods of seriously considering suicide. They have not actually done so because they feel responsible for the upbringing of their children; but for themselves, they feel that their life is finished. The only thing they desperately try to do is to reduce the consequences of the rape by keeping silent.

Silencing on the relationship level, especially the marital level
As previously noted, in many cultures a woman who is raped will not lose only her individual dignity but also the dignity of her family. This applies especially to her husband, who stands to lose his honour and respect. Therefore most women feel responsible for protecting their husbands, and keep silent in order to save them from humiliation and out of respect for their feelings.

In addition, most women are afraid that their husbands will divorce them if they reveal their experiences of sexual violence. All women know examples of men who could not live with the idea that their wives had been raped. But in most countries, the status of being divorced is extremely difficult for women. For instance, in South-Sudan women run the risk of being sent away, leaving their children behind without the possibility of even visiting them periodically. Young unmarried girls in Afghanistan can be forced to marry their rapists in an attempt to restore the honour of the family.
Many women told me that their fear is twofold: their husbands will either divorce them or will stay in the marriage but turn to psychological or physical violence. In other words, revealing experiences of sexual violence can have a devastating effect on a marriage which can escalate into domestic violence.

Sometimes the husband reacts very violently to the knowledge that his wife has been raped. Cultural gender roles restrict coping strategies, not only for the women, but also for the men. In Bosnia and Afghanistan, the husband is expected to act the moment he finds out. He has to take revenge, for example, or divorce his wife. As long as nothing has been said, however, even if the husband feels suspicious about it, he can ignore the cultural idea that he has to act. Therefore, according to the women, it is better to say nothing.

Women who suffer from sexual violence often experience difficulties in their relationship, not only because of the behaviour of their husbands, but because it is almost impossible for a woman to have a normal sexual relationship with her husband. For most women a sexual relationship triggers the rape memories. Most women whose husbands do not know develop all kinds of tricks to avoid sex with their husbands, and before having sex they take tranquillisers.

Although all these things happen in the marital context, I also want to stress that many husbands who do learn that their wives were raped during the war are very caring and supportive. They do their utmost to help their wives. However, because a husband will likewise not talk about his wife’s rape experiences, his behaviour is invisible to other people. Women do not have such positive examples. They only know the narratives in their culture about women whose husbands divorce them.

**Silencing on the community level**

The husband of Mariza, a woman who was raped by the Taliban, found her directly after the rape. He does not allow her to have contact with other Afghan women in the Netherlands. She thinks this is because he is afraid that she will share her rape experiences with other women and that he will lose his honour once other people get to know about this. Her husband, but also Mariza herself, regards the Afghan group as dangerous.

Most women do not dare to share their bad experiences and problems with other women, as they are too afraid that people would start to gossip and that the whole refugee group—and even family members in Afghanistan or Sudan—would learn of their experiences. Via gossip, women are exposed to judgment according to cultural notions of femininity and gender roles, and the prospect of such moral judgment is considered unbearable. Gossip is mostly connected with the ideas people have about how people should live their life (Manderson and Allotey 2003; Merry 1984; Vries 1990). It is an extremely powerful weapon for silencing and constricting women.

Gossipping creates cohesion and exclusion at the same time. It helps women to create relationships but it also works by excluding women who do not act according to the cultural notions other people have. So, women are afraid not only of being the subject of gossip but of the consequences of the gossip as well. The only way to protect themselves is to refrain from talking. Unfortunately, women are not very supportive of each other. In Afghanistan, women told me, the biggest enemy of a woman is a woman.
For the refugee women in the Netherlands, lacking the emotional support and protection of their own relatives, their host country makes them become dependent on the refugee group for support and social contacts. Although those refugee groups have taken over some functions that are normally performed by relatives, such as weddings, celebrations and funerals, it seems that asking support from group members is only possible in the case of non-sensitive issues. The public shame and the risk of desertion or expulsion are great—and become even greater if there are no alternative social relationships. Because women who have experienced sexual violence do not often have alternative relationships, the best coping strategy, accordingly to them, is to remain silent, as they fear exclusion by the group if knowledge of the violence they experienced should become public.

To keep silent is not only important for the position of the women and their husbands, but also for their children. In many countries, for young girls who are raped, it would be impossible to find a husband if the social environment were to know about their experiences. So to safeguard their future it is better to keep silent. Nonetheless many young women do not dare to marry because they are no longer virgins and they are afraid that their husbands would find out, which would be very shameful for the women and also for their families.

In the Sudanese group, if people know that a mother has given birth to a child out of rape, they will give the child a nickname that refers to the rape. Everybody would know immediately in what kind of situation the child had been born. If the child misbehaved, people would say that there was something wrong in the family. They would argue that the mother was raped and so there was also something wrong with the mother—“and you see there is also something wrong with the child”. Her other children too, and even grandchildren, would run the risk of being judged in this way. Women want to protect their children from such destructive judgments, and so remain silent.

Many women are unable to integrate their personal traumatic experiences of sexual violence into their group’s stories about sexual violence. As a result, within the group narrative sexual violence does not exist. This isolates them within their own physical and emotional condition. It is difficult to find a vehicle through which their experience can be made meaningful and, therefore, endurable. All women consider silence to be the best mechanism for coping with their experiences of the past, and also to be a way of preventing any kind of further manipulation or humiliation by members of their refugee social group. Some women even break off all contact with other refugees to avoid being excluded by the group, and to keep some sense of control.

Silencing on the societal level, particularly the Dutch asylum policy
Vesna, a refugee woman from Bosnia-Herzegovina, tells me:

The moment we arrived in Zevenaar (an application centre, MT) I felt that I had done something wrong. There were so many policemen. I lost consciousness during the first interview. I couldn’t say anything, I was so afraid. I experienced all the questions as an assault. I was so afraid of giving the wrong answers or the wrong data. It was the same interrogation as with our own police, I didn’t understand it at all. Then we were taken to a place and I and the children were separated from my husband. The children were screaming and crying. But my husband had to sleep somewhere else; the women were separated from their husbands. I was so afraid. And they body-searched us; every time
they body-searched us down to our bones. It was so confusing, so confusing and I was so frightened.

This is the first problem women face: they do not get enough time to adjust to the situation and to understand where they are and why, and what is expected (Bloemen 2005; Human Rights Watch 2003). Everything goes too fast, and often women who have been raped feel especially insecure and vulnerable, needing a situation in which they can have the sense of being in control as much as possible. In such situations as in the application centres, women definitely cannot talk about their rape experiences. I know several women who are now illegal migrants in the Netherlands who experienced very brutal rapes in camps for months on end, and who have serious psychiatric and physical symptoms; but they have never told anybody about their personal histories, even not their doctors.

Women do not know the conditions and implications of the asylum-seeking procedures in advance, and therefore they often do not dare ask for a female interviewer and interpreter even if they are told that they are allowed to do so. Most women are also not aware that they can make an individual application, separate from their husbands and with their own file. If a woman’s husband does not know that she has been raped she cannot talk about it during the interview if she is not sure that it will be kept confidential so her husband and others will never know.

Furthermore, the situation is not experienced as safe. Women are often afraid that the interpreter will support the enemy or will tell her secret to other people. Often women are interviewed by men and with male interpreters. Just being together with two men can already be too much in such a situation, therefore they cannot talk about their experiences.

Words like ‘sexual violence’ do not exist in many countries, so even if during the interview the women are asked about experiences with sexual violence they might not understand. But even if they do understand they might not have words for it, or might have never uttered such a word (because it is so bad) and are not able to do so at that moment either. Often women use symbolic language such as “my flower is not young and fresh any more, it is wilted”. Or as one Sudanese woman said during the interview “I have a child by a man I didn’t know”. The examiner did not understand what she meant, that she had been raped by a group of soldiers and had become pregnant.

Sometimes the women cannot remember spontaneously, and so their memories are not activated because the interviewer is not allowed to ask specific questions. If women have memories and do talk, they are often not able to tell everything and will often have no answers to specific facts an interviewer wants to know, such as the number of rapists, the place, clothing and so on.

For all these reasons most women do not talk about their experiences during the asylum-seeking procedure. There are other severe psychological reasons as well, such as for instance a state of dissociation in which memories are completely blocked.

Finally, women are not offered a medical examination, even though many women have gynaecological problems or are afraid that they have HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases. Furthermore, many women have scars due to bites by their rapists or burning cigarettes or other forms of torture.
Recommendations for improving the asylum procedure

How can the asylum procedure for those women be improved so that they can speak? I cannot speak for all judicial aspects, but reasoning from the women’s perspective I would like to give you some suggestions in the hope that you will take them into consideration.

- When refugees arrive, give them a few (two or three) weeks to settle, so that they have time to realise what has happened and where they are, what they need and what is expected from them.

- In those few weeks they should be able to get information about the procedure, and not only about the procedure and what is expected from them but also about their rights and possibilities, such as a female translator and a separate file, and the fact that the lawyers, although paid by the government, do not place themselves in the service of the government. It is also important to double-check that the information is understood.

- I would strongly suggest that all women be given a medical examination in those two weeks, if possible by a female doctor. During this examination the women must be informed of the rule that the doctor is required to keep confidentiality. The doctor must ask the women about experiences with sexual violence. If women talk at all, it is more likely that they will tell their story to a doctor, who is often considered to be trustworthy. The doctor can discuss with the woman how to bring this information into the immigration procedures.

- If there are reasons to assume that the woman might have experienced sexual violence or that she is traumatised, she must not be processed with the accelerated procedure.

- We all know that sexual violence is a deeply problematic issue. The limitation period for reporting rape to the police in the Netherlands is now 15 years. Some years ago this period was extended, because it was realised that it is very difficult for women to talk about experiences of that kind. For refugee women, talking can be very harmful, as I have explained. Nevertheless we expect them to reveal their experiences immediately. Therefore, my recommendation would be that it must become possible to bring in experiences of sexual violence at any time during the whole asylum procedure.

- Offer the women psychological support and/or support from a woman from the council for refugees, to whom she can go if she wants to, because (as we know) speaking means remembering, and remembering can be a kind of retraumatisation. And being alone with memories is very difficult, especially if your husband and children do not know and you have to act ‘normal’. It is helpful for a woman to know that there is one person who knows her secret and to whom she can go. It is not only that she can talk about her experiences; just being in the presence of someone who knows can already provide a sense of support.

Conclusion

I hope I have succeeded in showing you that rape in conflict situations is a weapon against a whole community, not only against an individual. It is also important to realise that in most situations speaking out might be harmful for the women.
It is almost as if, when a woman is raped, a bomb is planted but has not gone off. When the woman talks about it, the bomb explodes and destroys relationships, and also destroys the fabric of the community of which she is a part. So a woman who decides that she cannot talk about it is, in a way, protecting herself and the rest of her family from continuing violation. It is my contention that we all have to do our utmost to help those women to bring in their traumatic experiences during their application procedure. To help them do so in a careful and confidential way may keep the bomb from exploding.

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