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Rubina Peroomian explores sexual violence during the Armenian Genocide

by [Paul Chaderjian](#)

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Sherman Oaks, Calif. -

Rubina Peroomian, Ph.D., spoke recently at the Merdinian School in Sherman Oaks about her latest book, *And Those Who Continued Living in Turkey after 1915*.

At the conclusion of the event, which was hosted by the ARPA Institute, the *Armenian Reporter* asked Dr. Peroomian to expound on the topic of psychological and sexual warfare waged against Armenians during the Genocide of 1915 - a subject that the author has investigated extensively in her new study.

Armenian Reporter: How common were acts of psychological and sexual violence committed by the perpetrators during the Genocide?

Rubina Peroomian: Sexual violence in its broad sense and in all its forms, as defined in a recent report to the UN Commission on Human Rights, was a common practice of the Turkish perpetrators during persecutions and incarcerations of men, and deportations of the remaining men, women, and children.

Torture of men involving their sex organs was quite prevalent. The Turks cut off their victims' genitals, made them march naked, or circumcised Armenian men they had forcibly converted to Islam.

Sexual violence as a form of psychological torture was also committed by making Armenian men the helpless witnesses to the rape of their mothers, sisters, wives, or daughters. Of course, the perpetrators did this instinctively, taking pleasure in their "supremacy" over the Armenians and thus proving the "lowliness" of the Armenians, who, in the circumstances, were unable to defend their women. The psychological effect on the victims was that of demasculinization and dehumanization, which the survivors had to live with for the rest of their lives.

AR: Given the humiliating and horrific nature of these crimes, would you say that many survivors found it impossible to talk about them afterwards?

RP: Survivors of armed conflict or ethnic cleansing talking openly about their victimization by rape and other sexual violations is a recent phenomenon - seen especially since the Rwandan and Bosnian genocides. Even Holocaust scholars are only beginning to discover the sexual aspect of Jewish victimization during World War II, when, for instance, Jews were forced into sexual slavery in concentration camps.

In the Armenian case, that aspect, particularly sexual violence against men, was not reported adequately. Shame, guilt, fear, and the urge to defend their masculinity prevented male survivors from speaking out. Eyewitness accounts and memoirs touched upon the subject with passing remarks. Henry Morgenthau [the U.S. ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in 1913-16] describes the Turks as masters in devising new methods of torture, but he is discreet about the details. He writes: "I have by no means told the most terrible details, for a complete narration

of the sadistic orgies of which these Armenian men and women were the victims can never be printed in an American publication" [cited in *And Those Who Continued Living in Turkey after 1915*, page 99].

AR: What else can be done to uncover these crimes?

RP: It is already too late to talk to survivors and try to bring to light the kinds of experiences they avoided discussing during interviews by researchers. They took the secret to their graves. We need to read and reread the memoirs, the eyewitness accounts, the existing literature, and these are many.

Fortunately, there is a growing interest in this specific aspect of the Armenian Genocide, and today's scholarship is discovering new details that expand our understanding of the Catastrophe. One example of such research is an article by Danish historian **Matthias Bjornlund**, titled "[A Fate Worse than Dying: Sexual Violence during the Armenian Genocide](#)," which was recently published in [Genocide Studies and Prevention](#).

AR: You also spoke about Armenian women who were tattooed or branded like cattle by those who took them as their sexual slaves.

RP: The practice of tattooing women was most prevalent among Bedouin tribes, where thousands of Armenian women were taken in, rescued, bought, or kidnapped. The women were immediately converted to Islam and tattooed to mark them as property. I chose the picture of a tattooed Armenian woman for the cover of my book for a visual emphasis on the suffering of Armenian women during and after the Genocide.

The photo encapsulated my understanding of the lasting trauma that can be described as "When Death Is a Blessing and Life a Prolonged Agony." This is the title of a gender-specific research paper that I presented in 2000, comparing the responses of women victims of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust. [This article was published later in *Genocide Perspectives II: Essays on Holocaust and Genocide* ed. Colin Tatz, Peter Arnold, and Sandra Tatz, Sydney, 2003.]

AR: You mentioned an Armenian physician who worked to remove the female survivors' tattoos and restore their hymens. Tell us about him and his work.

RP: The doctor's name was Khosrov Krikorian, and my source for this information is a posting on the Internet by Mr. Maurice Kelechian.

The posting detailed his research on a carpet that was woven by Armenian orphan girls in the Ghazir orphanage in Beirut and gifted to U.S. President Calvin Coolidge, in appreciation of Near East Relief's support of the Armenian orphans. Mr. Kelechian discovered a replica of this rug, which was once owned by Dr. Krikorian. The replica was found at the home of the doctor's grandson. This is where Mr. Kelechian was informed of Dr. Krikorian's visits to the Armenian orphanages in Beirut in the aftermath of the Genocide and the surgeries he performed to remove the tattoos of the girls as well as to restore their virginity. These were young Armenian girls who were taken into Muslim homes as wives or concubines. Many of them escaped and found their way into orphanages.

The management of these orphanages, which operated on shoestring budgets and in very poor conditions, tried to marry the girls off to Armenian Genocide survivors. Most of these men, however, resented the tattooed women, knowing that they had been literally used in Muslim homes. With Dr. Krikorian's help, the girls were able to get a fresh start. Apparently, Dr. Krikorian has written an account of his experiences in the desert and the thousands of Armenian women in the Bedouin camps.

AR: Based on the memoirs and literature you researched while writing your book, did you detect a pattern of psychological trauma being passed down from the survivors of the Genocide to their children, who may or may not have been aware of their parents' true identity or survival stories? How were these traumas acted out among second- or third-generation survivors?

RP: Experiences vary, depending on the survivors' circumstances - i.e., on whether they remained Christians, were converted to Islam, or pretended to be Muslims but secretly practiced Christianity (the hidden Armenians).

Most of the Islamicized Armenian survivors, men or women, did not share their experiences of the Genocide with their offspring, out of fear or shame. Some did not even reveal that they were Armenian. Their stories and their identity are lost, and we can never be able to trace them.

There are others who trusted their stories to a member of the family. In some cases, that revelation devastated the trusted one; in others, it has become the beginning of a long journey of discovering the obscure story of their Armenian roots and thus their true identity. In many instances, the children or grandchildren of these survivors have heard their parents speak of their traumatic experiences of the past, and they, too, have learned to navigate and survive in an atmosphere of constant harassment and persecution that was the lot of minorities in Turkey.

In the final analysis, given the range of survivors' processes of living or coming to terms with the memory of the Genocide, it is hard to generalize as to the way that traumatic experiences and their unabated memory were transmitted to the next generation.

One should also take into consideration the children of those Armenian women who escaped their abductors and left their offspring behind. Imagine the psychological state of such children: they grew up hating or longing for their Armenian mothers, who for some reason had run away and left them orphans.

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