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Patriarchal norms in religious institutional discourses: a feminist critical discourse analysis of responses to conflict-related sexual violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Prior research has established that conflict-related sexual violence is anchored in patriarchal norms that persist across the continuum of war and peace. Religious leaders are widely recognized as influential in shaping such norms and are increasingly engaged in interventions aimed at changing them. What remains under-researched, however, is how patriarchal norms operate within religious institutions themselves, and how they shape the responses those institutions can offer. This article sets out to shed light on this question through a feminist critical discourse analysis of official statements, prayers and interviews with representatives of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, complemented by interviews with Bosnian civil society actors. The analysis shows that patriarchal norms determine what can be said about conflict-related sexual violence, who is recognized as a victim-/survivor, and what responses become possible. While elite discourses focus on women who experienced rape, male victimization and other forms of sexual violence remain largely invisible. At the grassroots level, imams internalize these framings in ways that shape whom they understand themselves as able to support. Turning to a training guide for religious leaders produced with international partners, the analysis suggests that these norms remain deeply entrenched, proving difficult to displace even in documents developed through such collaborations. Religious institutions are thus active producers of norms around conflict-related sexual violence, operating through registers that differ by hierarchical tier. Identifying where these norms are open to negotiation is essential for engaging religious actors against stigmatization and silence.

KEYWORDS
Bosnia and Herzegovina, conflict-related sexual violence, Islamic Community, patriarchal norms, religious leaders

1 Introduction

> I always say, and that's something I shared even with our colleagues in Ukraine, that in societies that are, and [...] ours definitely is, religious, very traditional, and patriarchal, [...] you need to have religious leaders to speak out loud and give

> instructions to the practitioners of religion on how to actually behave toward these individuals [victims of CRSV], because those same religions were the ones that were emphasizing, for example, the purity of body and soul, and that when a woman is raped, she's not pure anymore, neither her soul and body are. So that's a reason why they [religious leaders] are necessary in these processes [of transitional justice].

Such discussion[1] about the responsibility of religious leaders toward communities affected by conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) was one of the many I encountered during interviews in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), as part of a broader inquiry into how religious institutions influence societal responses to CRSV. The words of this NGO representative echo a growing acknowledgment, in both research and practice, of the influential role that faith authorities play in shaping the social norms that underpin the emergence, dynamics and social aftermath of gender-based violence in contexts of war and peace (see Le Roux and Palm, 2021; Tearfund, 2025). Her observation that religion bears the responsibility for the norms that sustain this violence and for the work to be done to dismantle them leads to the question I pursue in this article: how do patriarchal norms operate within religious institutional discourses to construct and delimit responses to CRSV?

This question matters because patriarchal norms are not incidental to CRSV but constitutive of it (Cohen et al., 2013). Rooted in gendered expectations that reassert hierarchies between male and female bodies (Kreft, 2023; Priyashantha et al., 2023), they sustain gendered violence along a continuum that transcends times of war and peace (Krause, 2015). This means that patriarchal norms do not emerge with the outbreak of conflict, suddenly creating fertile conditions for CRSV, nor do they disappear with the formal end of hostilities. Instead, during conflict they magnify, making CRSV a manifestation of the same underlying structures that drive sexual violence in peacetime (Kreft, 2019). In post-war contexts, the same notions of honor, purity and shame may translate into stigma and silence, compounding the challenges that victims-/survivors[2] face to reintegration, recognition and justice (Clark, 2022), with some potential correlation observed between CRSV and the incidence of post-war sexual violence in the domestic sphere (see Gray and Dolan, 2022; Schaub et al., 2025).

How communities respond to CRSV and those it has affected is thus influenced by prevailing gender norms, with responses ranging from stigmatization to acceptance (Koos and Lindsey, 2022; Rubini et al., 2023). However, like other social norms, prescriptions about gender are not static but can shift over time. Social norms guide our behavior by setting expectations about what others would think and do in similar situations (Bicchieri, 2017). These expectations are not just reflected in observable behavioral patterns but are actively reproduced through language. The way a norm is described, the specific words chosen and the references invoked, all influence how this norm is perceived, internalized and acted upon (Kuang and Bicchieri, 2024). Hence, language can redirect attention toward specific aspects of a phenomenon, alter the inferences that listeners draw about (in-)appropriate behavior, and elicit responses that can either reinforce or hinder existing normative expectations (Ibid).

Who communicates these norms is significant. The others whose behavior and judgment orients our own are not just anyone, but trusted individuals whose words carry weight precisely because of the credibility and authority they are invested with (Bicchieri, 2017). Religious leaders are increasingly recognized as among such consequential actors. Through sermons, ritual practices and official statements, religious authorities continuously expose congregants to normative framings of gender and sexuality, thereby having the potential to shape societal understandings of phenomena such as gender-based violence (Berhanu et al., 2025; Bitton and Hadad, 2025).

The role of religious leaders is, however, not straightforward. Research shows that while they can legitimize stigma and victim-blaming (UNDP, 2014; Le Roux et al., 2020; Istratii and Ali, 2023; Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2023), they can also be helpful in re-assigning responsibility, fostering compassion and creating supportive spaces for victims-/survivors (Umubyeyi et al., 2020; Le Roux and Palm, 2021). This ambivalence is the point of departure of this article. A growing body of research and policy rests on a compelling logic: gender-based violence is partly norm-driven and religious leaders yield the necessary influence to shape norms, therefore engaging religious leaders is a pathway to norm change. Yet, this logic skips a prior and necessary question: how do these norms operate within religious institutions in the first place?

Existing research has engaged with the role of religious leaders primarily through the experiences of victims-/survivors (Le Roux et al., 2016; Sandilands et al., 2017; Le Roux and Palm, 2021), leaving the normative content of what they convey and how this shapes responses to CRSV largely unexamined. Furthermore, scholarship has tended to treat religious leaders as an umbrella term that can in principle encompass entire institutional hierarchies—from elite to grassroots actors—while in practice using it as a synonym for latter, such as priests and imams. As already discernible from the epigraph, the interviewee makes a distinction between "religious leaders" and "practitioners of religion," suggesting that hierarchy does in fact matter in light of the different roles that elite and grassroots actors play as they engage with the phenomenon of CRSV[3]. Finally, this long-standing

1 Interview with Representative, Association A, Sarajevo, April 2025.

2 Henceforth, I will use a combination of both the terms *victim* and *survivor* to refer of people who have experienced conflict-related sexual violence. This is so that this research acknowledges that neither term is right or wrong; but its use to be dependent on how these people choose to define themselves. Thus, specific references to either one of the terms will only be made when reporting of interviewees' way of describing this phenomenon, thereby contributing to the question at analysis.

3 I argue that elite religious leaders who represent their denomination nationally and globally, such as the Raisu-l-ulema in the case of the Islamic Community in BiH, or the Pope in the case of the Catholic Church—differ from grassroot religious leaders (imams and priests) and teachers (muallimas in Islamic tradition), not only in how they communicate, but in who they reach. The former addresses a broader, often international audience through official edicts that function as institutional statements yet maintain less direct contact with local communities. By contrast, the latter engages daily with ordinary people through sermons, prayers and religious teachings. This difference in proximity often justifies the narrow focus on grassroot religious leaders; nevertheless, not only it excludes other layers of the institution itself, but also other grassroot actors, such as religious teachers themselves.

conflation may also feed premises on religious institutions as intrinsically patriarchal, without disentangling how and through which specific registers patriarchal norms are produced and sustained within.

Scholars have begun to investigate the relationship between patriarchy and responses to CRSV in relation to social institutions more broadly (see Kreft, 2023). Here, I extend this work by turning the same analytical lens onto religious institutions. I argue that patriarchal norms embedded in religious discourses can create and delimit what can be said of CRSV, who is recognized as a victim, and what responses, as a result, are rendered legitimate. As I will show, while elite discourses create space for certain categories of violence and victims, like *women* subjected to *rape*, and for children born of wartime rape, they simultaneously silence experiences that do not fit within this frame. At the grassroots level, conversations with imams suggest that such broader framings are then internalized, influencing implicit understandings of whom they can support and how. Hence, rather than treating the patriarchal character of religious institutions as a given, I make it the object of the analysis, disentangling how the same norms operate across different hierarchical tiers.

By attending to language, I show how religious leaders at different hierarchical levels mobilize customary discourses on CRSV through a feminist critical discourse analysis of official statements, prayers and interviews with representatives of the Islamic Community (IC) in BiH. This is a particularly relevant case given that, because of the systematic perpetration of CRSV against an overwhelming majority of Bosniak Muslims (Olujic, 1998; Clark, 2022), the IC occupies a focal position in both global and national efforts to address CRSV and the statements of its representatives continue to carry considerable symbolic weight (Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2023). I then also complement this data with interviews with Bosnian civil society associations, whose reflections contextualize how religious discourses have landed in society more broadly.

The contributions of this article are two-fold. First, I advance research on the social aftermath of CRSV by examining responses of religious institutions that, much like patriarchal norms themselves, exist across the continuum of war and peace as anchors of social life, for better and for worse. Second, I expand our understanding of religious leaders as actors whose hierarchical position shapes the ways they do and undo gender in their engagement with CRSV. Together, these contributions provide the basis to understand why religious leaders are key actors in shifting norms around CRSV, how these norms operate and where they can be negotiated.

Thirty years on, the Bosnian case functions as something of a time machine. Insights on the role that religious discourses play in shaping social responses to CRSV matter beyond this context. In contemporary conflicts as different as those in Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine, where CRSV has been extensively documented (UNHRC, 2025a,b,c), and religious institutions are key in defining norms around gender and social conduct, this longitudinal perspective is particularly valuable. Understanding how and why religious leaders come to influence these processes early on may help avoid responses that create hierarchies of victims and that silence some experiences altogether, alerting us to the fact that even where religious discourses are well-intentioned, they can reinforce patriarchal norms that determine whose suffering is recognized and whose is not.

2 Literature review

2.1 The patriarchal logics behind conflict-related sexual violence

CRSV does not emerge from the dynamics of war alone. Seminal scholarship shows that it exists along a temporal and spatial continuum, where the same patriarchal norms sustain gendered forms of violence during times of both war and peace (Enloe, 2000). In this article, I define patriarchal norms as the structures and practices through which male authority is organized, legitimated and reproduced across public and private life (Walby, 1989; Hunnicutt, 2009), resting at their core on a fundamental imbalance of power between genders. While masculinity is always ascribed dominance, rationality and invulnerability, femininity is coded as passive, emotional and in need of protection or control (Sjoberg, 2016). Patriarchal norms naturalize vulnerability and inscribe male control over female sexuality as legitimate, while locating collective honor and shame within their bodies. From males, the same norms demand sexual dominance and impermeability, such that victimhood itself becomes a feminized condition. Hence, male bodies cannot, within this framework, be considered as legitimate victims. The patriarchal construction of the "ideal victim" is always feminized, leaving male survivors outside of the frame of recognition and female survivors burdened by a shame sustained by patriarchal norms themselves (Baldwin, 2026; Depraetere et al., 2020).

In war-affected contexts, CRSV is not a divergent trend from "peacetime" gender norms, but it reproduces and intensifies the same gendered hierarchies that exist in society and the home while remaining distinct from peacetime sexual violence (Kreft, 2023). CRSV is perpetrated at a higher scale (Boesten, 2017) and in ways less common during peace such as gang rape (Cohen, 2016) and can be instrumentalized as a weapon of war to weaken and humiliate the enemy (Seifert, 1996). The social consequences of CRSV are similarly shaped by patriarchal logics. At the individual level, victims-/survivors can experience stigma and secondary victimization, including rejection from family and community (Bar-Tal et al., 2014; Rubini et al., 2023; Woldetsadik et al., 2022). Children born of wartime rape are affected similarly, facing lifelong challenges to identity and belonging (Rose, 2025; Wagner et al., 2025). These outcomes are related to notions of honor and purity that underpin the perpetration of sexual violence during war and, in its aftermath, sustain the view of victims as bearers of collective shame. At the institutional level, these norms reinforce silence and discrimination, generating challenges to reintegration (Finnbakk and Nordås, 2019; Østby et al., 2019), reparation (Ní Aoláin et al., 2015) and legal recognition (Clark, 2022; TRIAL International, 2024; Rose, 2025; Wagner et al., 2025).

2.2 Why religious leaders matter

The relationship between patriarchal norms and the social consequences of CRSV is precisely what brings norms at the center of interventions to counter stigmatizing behavior. Religion occupies a distinctive position in this regard. For millions of people

worldwide, religion is an integral part of everyday life and a "human resource" for navigating suffering, loss and social rupture (Ter Haar, 2011 in Le Roux and Pertek, 2022). What distinguishes religion from other potential sites of norm change, such as schools, media and politics, is the combination of reach, relational depth and normative authority that representatives command simultaneously. Through the organizational infrastructure of religious communities, norms around gender, sexuality and violence are transmitted and reproduced across generations (Le Roux and Pertek, 2022). Where religious identification runs deep, religious leaders are trusted not only because of what they represent, but also for being perceived to stand at the intersection of the material and the spiritual world (Bercovitch and Kadayifci, 2009). This combination of communal trust and institutional reach has also made faith leaders recurrent actors in peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts more broadly (Driessen, 2025).

Against this backdrop, a growing body of faith-based interventions demonstrates that religious leaders are key authorities capable of influencing beliefs and practices around gender-based violence (see Istratii and Ali, 2023), with some focusing on conflict-affected communities specifically (Le Roux and Cadavid Valencia, 2019; Le Roux et al., 2020; Tearfund, 2025). While promoting women's participation and leadership is argued to catalyse attitudinal change at the macro level, engaging faith leaders is argued to produce more durable shifts in the norms that sustain stigma (UNSC, 2025). The evidence points simultaneously in two directions: religious leaders can endorse patriarchal beliefs and practices contributing to the stigmatization or silencing of victims-/survivors (Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2023), but their messages can also catalyse reintegration for both them and their children (Sandilands et al., 2017).

Despite this empirical richness, we lack a comprehensive understanding of how patriarchal norms operate within religious discourses before these reach communities at all, and how they shape religious institutional responses to CRSV specifically. Kreft (2023) offers the most recent examination of how patriarchal norms shape institutional responses to CRSV in the Colombian context. She shows how gender norms compound stigmatization for survivors, focusing on the role that civil society organizations play in reclaiming victims' agency and power. Religious institutions, while mentioned in passing, fall outside the scope of the analysis. Where they are at focus, recent scholarship on religion and gender-based violence demonstrates that the relationship between religious doctrine and patriarchal norms is neither static nor uniform, with survivors actively contesting and re-interpreting sacred texts as sources of resistance rather than subordination (Le Roux and Pertek, 2022). While this illuminates how patriarchal norms are negotiated within religious life, it tells us little about how religious institutions respond to CRSV and how patriarchal norms are constitutive of these responses. Moreover, sermons and official statements are equally important vehicles as sites of norm (re)production yet remain at the sidelines of such analyses.

Equally limited is the attention to the internal architecture of religious institutions. Faith actors across complex hierarchies are often collapsed under the label of "religious leaders," with analyses gravitating almost exclusively around grassroots actors (see Gezinski et al., 2023; Le Roux et al., 2020; Moon and Shim, 2010; Sandilands et al., 2017). This conflation obscures whether institutional responses to CRSV may look different depending on the hierarchical level at focus, and to what extent patriarchal norms travel across tiers. In other words, the literature has assumed that patriarchal understandings of CRSV are consistent across institutional hierarchies, operating the same ways and producing the same responses.

To address this gap, I engage with scholarly enquiries at the intersection of religion, gender and conflict, drawing on the idea that patriarchy is an exercise of constantly (un)doing gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 2004), and that gender norms are not fixed in religious doctrine but continuously produced, contested and reconstituted through religious practice (Avishai et al., 2015; Darwin, 2018)[4].

Combining this enquiry with evidence on the role of religious leaders, my primary objective is to shed light on how patriarchal norms operate within religious institutions to construct and delimit discursive responses to CRSV. In the next section, I argue for the analytical leverage that the Bosnian context offers and what its scope tells us about other cases where widespread CRSV is a vivid reality.

3 The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina

3.1 The Bosnian war and sexual violence

During the war in BiH between 1992 and 1995, sexual violence was largely defined as a deliberate instrument of ethnic cleansing (ICTY, 2026). Although all sides in the conflict perpetrated CRSV (Clark, 2022), this violence was committed disproportionately by Bosnian Serb forces against the Bosniak Muslim population, targeting women and men alike (Olujic, 1998). In contexts where ethnicity and religion define the boundaries between groups, gender functions as an ethno-marker: male and female bodies are read as physical representatives of the ethnic group they belong to, so that sexually violating them is understood as a violation and subordination of their communities as a whole, thus making CRSV a *weapon of war* (Mežnarić, 1994; Misra, 2015; Skjelsbæk, 2001). The resulting logic is one where gender hierarchies are reinforced: the sexual act degrades the victim while empowering the perpetrator, producing a power relationship in which masculinised identities are ascribed dominance and feminized ones are stripped of it.

While the war formally ended with the Dayton Agreement in 1995, the legacy of CRSV proves enduring to this day. BiH has been recognized as a paradigmatic site for studying how gender norms are negotiated in post-conflict contexts (Doeland and Skjelsbæk, 2018). Thirty years on, exposure to CRSV is consistently associated

4 More recent work has begun to examine the contradictions through which religious institutions simultaneously modify and reinforce patriarchal structures. For instance, Agadjanian (2025) shows how traditional gender norms are challenged by churches as they attempt to "feminize" congregational spaces, resulting in an apparent cultivation of women's agency, only for the same spaces to remain anchored to gender hierarchies.

with poor mental and physical health for both male and female victims-/survivors, as well as with experiences of domestic violence (Schaub et al., 2025). These consequences are compounded by stigma and social exclusion also for children born of wartime rape, rooted in the same narratives of honor and shame that conditioned the perpetration of CRSV in the first place (Carpenter, 2010; Clark, 2017a; Czeszejko-Sochacka, 2022). Challenges in meaningful reparation persist in both political and legal settings (Clark, 2023), and the experiences of male victims-/survivors remain at the sidelines (Touquet, 2022).

3.2 The Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a case study

Within this context, religious leaders have occupied a contested role. They have been criticized for supporting violent narratives, instrumentalising religious identity to legitimize political and military goals (Perica, 2002), and for failing to contribute to reconciliation processes after the war (Clark, 2010). Yet, they have also engaged in the provision of humanitarian aid, spiritual assistance and emotional support to their communities (Brajovic, 2006 in Odak, 2024). Despite this ambivalence, religious leaders in BiH are argued to retain a pivotal capacity to shape processes of peacebuilding and reconciliation (Clark, 2010; Odak, 2021).

Almost all Bosnian citizens identify with a religious tradition[5]. Religious institutions exercise significant authority within their respective ethno-national constituencies. Their joint engagement is institutionalized through the Interreligious Council of BiH (IRC-BiH), established in 1997 to actualize the reconciliation objectives of the Dayton Peace Agreement and recognized as a landmark institution for interreligious cooperation (Clark, 2010). The IRC-BiH has engaged itself with the phenomenon of CRSV, adopting a Declaration that condemns the stigmatization of survivors and emphasizing the responsibility of religious communities to be spaces of acceptance rather than judgment (UNFPA Bosnia Herzegovina, 2017).

Against such a background, the Islamic Community emerges as a crucial case in the *least-likely* sense (see Gerring, 2006). The logic of this selection rests on the theoretical prediction being tested, that patriarchal institutional norms constrain religious responses to CRSV, producing selective recognition and silences even where strong incentives exist. As the largest denomination in the country, the IC is recognized as a reservoir of symbolic authority, capable of shaping national discourses across a broad range of social, moral and political questions that extend beyond religious doctrine (Hesová and Rašidagić, 2020). Because majority of victims-/survivors were Bosnian Muslims, the IC bore a distinctive responsibility in how this violence was publicly framed (Spahić Šiljak and Anić, 2022), thus facing stronger institutional incentives to support and advocate for victims-/survivors than perhaps any other religious institution in the country. These incentives were compounded by the global spotlight on the conflict itself, which contributed to the skyrocketing of international involvement around CRSV for the first time (Kreft, 2019) and the development of related normative and legal frameworks (Clark, 2023)[6]. Moreover, evidence collected at the time (see Olujic, 1998) already pointed to an array of sexual violations beyond rape, affecting women and men alike. Yet, as the analysis will show, existing documentation did not displace assumptions around women as the only victims reliant on male protection from male-perpetrated violence. While the patriarchal character of religious institutions is not a novel insight, how patriarchal norms function to constrain post-war responses to CRSV remains underexplored in both research and practice.

3.3 What the Bosnian case can tell us about contemporary CRSV

The cases this study speaks to consist of religious institutions that bear significant authority in conflict-affected societies where CRSV has been widespread. The comparative relevance of the IC can already be observed beyond the Bosnian case. In Gaza, the sexual violence documented as systematic and targeted is described as intended to "feminize or shame not only the victim but the Palestinian community as a whole" (UNHRC, 2025a), in a society where religious leaders shape communal understandings of gender roles and social conduct (Hattab and Abualrob, 2023). In Darfur, this violence is deliberately deployed against non-Arab communities as a tool of humiliation (MSF, 2026), in a broader context where religious leaders retain significant influence over gender norms, making them both vectors of harm and agents of potential change (Tønnessen and Al-Nagar, 2024). In Ukraine, CRSV has been extensively documented (UNHRC, 2025b) with churches playing an active role in the broader contestation of gender norms ever since before the war (Elsner, 2022). When CRSV unfolds alongside salient religious identities and influential religious actors, the question of how these institutions engage with the patriarchal norms constitutive of this violence becomes critical, for it is one with implications on how communities recover, or fail to, in its aftermath.

4 Methodology

4.1 Feminist critical discourse analysis

I employ a feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) to examine how norms operate through language within the IC. Since language plays a crucial role in the transmission and perception of social norms (Kuang and Bicchieri, 2024), attending to language is a necessary entry point for understanding how patriarchal norms are sustained, or challenged, within religious discourses.

Drawing on Fairclough's (1992, 2013) three-dimensional framework, I construct the analysis attending simultaneously to the linguistic properties of text—what is being said—how these

5 Muslims constitute approximately 51% of the population, followed by Serbian Orthodox Christians at 31%, Roman Catholics at 15% and others at 3%, with religion strongly correlating with ethnicity across all three communities (United States Department of State, 2022).

6 The Bosnian war, together with the Rwandan genocide, did in fact mark a turning point for CRSV to be considered a stand-alone wartime phenomenon.

TABLE 1 List of archival sources.

List of archival sources						
Source category	Title	Author/institution	Date	Language	Retrieval strategy	Analytical use
Fatwa	"Fatwa on Raped Women"	Omerdić, M. in Glasnik Rijaseta Islamske zajednice	1992	Bosnian	Interview-elicited	FCDA
	"On Chetniks' Crimes Committed over Muslim Girls and Women"	Omerdić, M. in Oslobodenje	1992	English	Interview-elicited	FCDA
	"Chetnik Crimes Against Muslim Women: It's not the children's fault!"	Omerdić, M. in Oslobodenje	1993	Bosnian	Interview-elicited	FCDA
	"A Message to Raped Women"	Nurudin, D.A. in Islamic Thought	1993	Bosnian	Interview-elicited	FCDA
Khutbah	Sermon on Sexual Violence in War	Islamic Community of BiH	2023	Bosnian	Interview-elicited	FCDA
Training Guide	Handbook for Religious Professionals for Work with Victims of Rape in War	Interreligious Council of BiH, UNDP, British Embassy	2019	English	Interview-elicited	FCDA

discourses are produced institutionally, and what power relations they sustain. Adopting a feminist approach means focusing on how discourses serve as conduit of patriarchal norms (Lazar, 2007). The lexical choices around sexuality, honor and shame will thus be the focus of the analysis. In doing so, I pay attention to what is absent as much as to what is present, treating silences and exclusions as analytically significant. I rely on three types of data: archival documents, semi-structured interviews, and the meta-data surrounding their production, which together capture discourses, and silences, produced at different levels of the IC.

4.2 Archival sources

The archival sources are of three types (see Table 1). First, four *fatwas*—official edicts issued by elite representatives of the IC during the war—constitute the institution's formal response to CRSV and victims-/survivors. Second, a *khutbah*—a sermon that is drafted by elite representatives of the IC and read by imams in the mosque during Friday prayer—addresses CRSV on the International Day for the Elimination of CRSV and provides evidence of how discourses were constructed in the post-war public sphere. Third, a training guide produced by the Interreligious Council of BiH in collaboration with the UNFPA and the British Embassy[8] contains both a dedicated excerpt from each religious denomination in BiH and a guide for religious leaders on how to engage with victims-/survivors. Together, these sources offer initial evidence on religious discourses from war through contemporary times[7].

4.3 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews (see Table 2) were conducted with representatives of the IC across two institutional tiers: three imams operating at the grassroot level from Central Bosnia Canton, Brčko District, and Sarajevo Canton, and one elite representative holding an administrative position within the Riyasat, the executive body of the IC in BiH. As most interviews were conducted in Bosnian, an interpreter was hired to provide consecutive interpretation and translation to English[9, 10].

Given the deliberate focus on religious institutions, participants were identified through purposive sampling. While initial contact was established with representatives within the Riyasat, and access to religious leaders at lower institutional tiers was then facilitated through these elite contacts, following a snowballing approach that reflects the difficulty of reaching religious actors for enquiries touching on a subject as sensitive as CRSV. Interviews with civil society were included where appropriate, to contextualize how discourses were received by actors working directly with victims-/survivors and Bosnian society more broadly. All interviewees were pseudonymized, and questions focused on participants' institutional roles and engagement with CRSV rather than direct or indirect experience of victimization[11].

Through the archival data, I examine how the IC's elite framing of CRSV has shifted or remained stable over time and across different communicative registers. The interviews

7 See Supplementary material for a more detailed discussion on the archival documents.

8 At the time of writing, this is the only guide the institution has produced for religious leaders on how to engage with the phenomenon of CRSV and those who have been victimised.

9 See Supplementary material for a more detailed discussion on the interviews.

10 Because FCDA as a methodology relies heavily on language, linguistic and conceptual accuracy were ensured in two ways. First, by the professional expertise of the interpreters. Second, by comparing and contrasting the English translation of a software used to transcribe the interviews' recordings with that of the interpreters.

11 See Supplementary material for a more detailed discussion on the ethical considerations at the core of this research.

TABLE 2 List of interviews.

List of interviews						
Category of respondents	Respondent (assignment location)	language	Interview location	Interview date	Sampling strategy	Analytical use
religious leaders	Elite Religious Leader (Sarajevo Canton)	Bosnian	Sarajevo, in-person interview	March 2025	Snowball	FCDA
	Imam (Sarajevo Canton)	Bosnian	Sarajevo, In-person interview	December 2025	Snowball	FCDA
	Imam (Brčko District)	Bosnian	Sarajevo, In-person interview	December 2025	Snowball	FCDA
	Imam (Central Bosnia Canton)	Bosnian	Encrypted written correspondence	January 2026	Snowball	FCDA
Civil Society Associations	Representative, Association A (Sarajevo Canton)	English	Zoom interview	April 2025	Purposive	Findings' contextualization
	Representative, Association B (Sarajevo Canton)	Bosnian	Sarajevo, In-person interview	March 2025	Purposive	Findings' contextualization

then show to what extent official elite framings trickle down to leaders at lower institutional tiers. They are analytically valuable because they show how religious leaders engage with this phenomenon and because of what they reveal about whom discourses on CRSV implicitly refer to. To surface these assumptions, the interview questions deliberately employed gender-neutral language[12] and were careful never to default to a particular form of harm (e.g., rape). This allowed respondents to define the phenomenon, and those affected, on their own terms. It is in the tension between official and individual framings both during wartime and 30 years later that the analysis locates how patriarchal norms are institutionally reproduced.

4.4 Metadata

The conditions of data production are themselves analytically significant. Its value lies not only in its content but also in the metadata that surrounds it: the rumors, denials, evasions, and silences that reveal how present conditions shape what people are willing to say about past violence (Fujii, 2010). The empirical material is skewed toward elite representatives of the IC, which reflects two constraints. The sampling strategy, while necessary given the sensitivity of the research, originated from within the Riyasat, meaning that access to lower institutional tiers was mediated by elite gatekeepers and that those willing to speak were unlikely to be representative of the full range of institutional voices. The archival sources present an analogous problem. Despite the IC being one of the most publicly scrutinized religious institutions in the aftermath of the war, official documentation on its engagement remains remarkably sparse and difficult to locate. The sources identified span a period of 20 to 25 years. Such gaps in the archival record are themselves evidence of how CRSV has been institutionally managed, and the absence of documentation in certain periods speaks as loudly as its presence in others. The absence of material is equally telling: despite the IC maintaining an online archive of khutbahs, monthly magazines, and a question-and-answer section where ordinary citizens may ask about any topic, references to CRSV were strikingly scarce.

That said, the constraints that characterized data collection and access are precisely what makes FCDA the appropriate analytical framework. Structured attention to discursive patterns would be difficult to sustain across a larger corpus without sacrificing the granularity that makes such analysis meaningful. In this sense, the methodological choices made were not despite the limitations discussed, but in acknowledgment of them.

4.5 Operationalizing patriarchal norms

Building on its theoretical definition, I operationalize patriarchal norms as discursive patterns that can be identified and traced across four interrelated dimensions: the construction of victimhood—whether and how victims-/survivors are recognized as legitimate subjects of harm, or whether their recognition is conditional on their conformity to norms of femininity, purity and passivity; the distribution of honor and shame—how collective honor and shame is located within whose body; the gendering of silence—which experiences of CRSV are spoken about and which are not; and the framing of protection and agency for victims.

Rather than following deductively from the definition alone, these dimensions were consolidated through an iterative engagement between theory and empirics. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of theme development, horizontal coding of each source initially generated a broader set of candidate codes that mirrored the concepts drawn from

12 In Bosnian, while the term for "victim" (*Žrtva*) is gender-neutral, "survivor" is inherently gendered—translating to either *preŽivjeli* (masculine) or *preživjela* (feminine). To maintain gender neutrality, participants were referred to as "persons affected by this violence" throughout, unless a respondent was asked directly about whom they had in mind when using the words "victim" or "survivor."

the literature. Where codes captured overlapping patterns, they were then grouped and coded vertically at the node level across all sources[13]. Although these are not exhaustive ways in which patriarchal norms operate discursively, these dimensions provide the analytical anchors through which the IC's institutional language can be systematically examined[14]. While the analysis reflects my positionality as a researcher[15], transparency allows for it to be traced and assessed. The four dimensions identified therefore reflect one theoretically informed reading of the institutional language used by the IC in BiH.

5 Analysis

The analysis is organized thematically and each section flows in two movements. First, I conduct a quantitative analysis of the corpus that examines how elite representatives of the IC construct the identity of victims-/survivors and the nature of the violence itself[16]. By highlighting the frequency of lexical choices around what type of violence is at focus, who qualifies as a victim-/survivor, how this person is described and where responsibility lies, I show how the IC has sustained—from the wartime period until today—a heavily gendered view of what being a victim-/survivor looks like and therefore what responses to CRSV are warranted. I then complement these with interviews with individual religious leaders, which show how broader framings around CRSV travel to other tiers of the institution, ultimately shaping responses to this violence.

5.1 Following the gaze

5.1.1 Rape as a synonym of wartime sexual violence

The forms of harm we name as defining CRSV shape our understanding of what constitutes it and what does not (Schulz, 2021). Definitions do not merely describe violence but direct our analytical gaze, highlighting certain experiences while casting others into shadow. The extent to which definitions rely on gender-specific terms establishes implicit assumptions about who the victims and perpetrators are, which then travel into policy and institutional responses (see UNSC, 2010; Kreft and Schulz, 2022). For instance, earlier conceptualizations focused on women and girls as the sole possible victims, and on penetrative rape as the only harm to which one could be subjected (see Sharlach, 2001). While it is statistically accurate to say that, to date, CRSV affects a majority of female victims (UNSC, 2026), a blind reliance on these numbers has long dictated the systematic exclusion of men and boys' stories, whose experiences of violence have often been stripped of their sexual component and relegated to the category of torture (Gray et al., 2019). Over time, definitions of CRSV have evolved considerably to encompass different forms of sexual harm, including coercion, torture, and mutilation[17]. Hence, since to be named is to be seen, the analysis builds on these more comprehensive conceptualizations of CRSV, so as to remain attentive to the full plethora of experiences even where they are not immediately apparent.

Elite discourses consistently default to rape as the operative term, a lexical choice remarkably stable both within and across documents. This pattern is pronounced also in the two most recent documents: both the *khutbah* (Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2023) and the Handbook (Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019) center on victims of rape, even when the title promises attention to the wider phenomenon of sexual violence[18]. This is significant given the extensive evidence about the variety of forms CRSV took during the war, including sexual torture, coerced witnessing and sexual mutilation, among others (OSCE, 2014; Clark, 2017b). Defaulting to rape forecloses other forms of CRSV so that victims-/survivors may approach religious leaders without either party having a language for what they lived. Research on access to care documents precisely this dynamic: where institutional responses are grounded on narrow definitions, care providers fail to recognize and document forms of harm that fall outside them and those affected struggle to think of their own experiences as violence at all (Rubini et al., 2023).

As the training guide suggests, this selective gaze is also present in the context of collaboration with international agencies who have been at the forefront of efforts to broaden experiential understandings of CRSV (see UNSC, 2026; Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative, 2022). By also adopting a rape-centered framing, the document misses the opportunity to displace gendered assumptions about this phenomenon in religious institutions, at a time when religious leaders

13 Coding, analysis and interpretation was carried out in Nvivo.

14 Coding, analysis and interpretation were not validated through consensus checks across multiple researchers. Rather than treating this as a limitation, this is consistent with the premise that coding of qualitative data is inherently an interpretive process rather than a neutral one, regardless of how much one strives for objectivity (Jacobs et al., 2021).

15 For a more extensive discussion, see Supplementary material.

16 This analysis was conducted manually by first converting the documents to Word files to better use the filter function in NVivo to identify the relevant terms. Each term was then assessed individually. Only the nouns, pronouns and adjectives referring to victims-/survivors were included in the final count. Frequency counts were then normalized to allow comparison across sources of different lengths, expressed as occurrences per 1,000 words (Biber et al., 1998). Because grammatical structures make it possible to discern the function of each word, ambiguous cases were rare and mostly involved words that could function as both an adjective and a verb (e.g., raped; "the raped woman" vs. "she was raped") which were the focus of the word cloud analysis rather than the frequency analysis. See Supplementary material for a more detailed discussion.

17 I draw on Schulz (2021: 36) approach to the Rome Statute to define it as: "Acts or threats of violence of a sexual nature perpetrated directly on and against victims, which the victim may be forced to perform or watch being performed on others within the family or community." As far as the "conflict-related" element of the term, I refer to sexual violence that is perpetrated by armed actors during periods of conflict or immediately post conflict (Cohen and Nordås, 2014).

18 One could rightly argue that because some of the titles make explicit mention of rape, then it is expected that the document itself will focus solely on this harm. However, not only no complementary sermon or training guide exist to speak of other forms of CRSV perpetrated, but the ways in which these sources consistently refer to sexual violence in their corpus suggest that rape is indeed treated as its synonym (See Archival 1, 2, 4, and 6 in Table 3).

TABLE 3 Descriptive frequency of gender-specific language in official documents by elite leaders of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Source code	Source title (raw word count)	Gender specific language count	
		Female-specific raw count (normalized per 1,000 words)[a]	Male-specific raw count (normalized per 1,000 words)[b]
Archival 1	Fatwa on "Abortion from Violent Intercourse" (246)[1]	3 (12.20)	0
Archival 2	Fatwa on "On Chetniks' Crimes Against Muslim Girls and Women" (3038)[2]	143 (47.07)	0
Archival 3	Fatwa on "Children Born of Wartime Rape" (578)[3]	16 (27.68)	0
Archival 4	Fatwa "A Message to Raped Women" (3238)[4]	43 (13.28)	3 (0.93)
Archival 5	Khutbah, Sermon on Sexual Violence in War (927)[5]	15 (16.18)	2 (2.16)
Archival 6	Training guide "Handbook for Religious Professionals for Work with Victims of Rape in War" (3388)[6]	40 (11.81)	0
	Total raw count (normalized)	**260 (22.78)**	**5 (0.44)**

[a]Female-specific language includes woman/women, girl(s), mother(s), female(s), daughter(s), sister(s), wife/wives, she/her. Counts reflect only references to victims; occurrences referring to other generic usage are excluded. [b]Male-specific language includes man/men, boy(s), father(s), male(s), son(s), brother(s), husband(s), he/his. Counts reflect only references to victims; occurrences referring to God/Allah/Prophet, perpetrators, children born of rape, or generic usage are excluded. [1]Omerdić (1992a), [2]Omerdić (1992b), [3]Omerdić (1993), [4]Nurudin (1993), [5]Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2023), [6]Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2019).

themselves are increasingly recognized as key actors in efforts to combat stigmatization. Perhaps due to how strong patriarchal understandings of sexuality tend to be within religious circles, the Handbook remains largely procedural in the way it addresses CRSV. Yet, such training materials may carry real weight in shaping what religious leaders are equipped to recognize and respond to, and this significance deserves to be acknowledged.

The interviews both mirror these patterns and present partial yet meaningful departures. Two of the imams default to rape as the category of reference. One of them provides the most unambiguous example: when recalling conversations with victims-/survivors, he reports that they "would rather have been killed than experience that shameful act of rape"[19]. This formulation distinguishes rape as the most defining and unspeakable harm, so much that death would be preferred. This discourse is structurally identical to that of the fatwa on *Chetniks' Crimes* (Omerdić, 1992b), which recites: "Muslims think highly of life, but, more than that, they think and value honor and good name." In both cases, what seems to make rape legible is not the violation *per se* but its destruction of honor—in turn affecting family, community and religious belonging. The imam from Sarajevo[20] echoes this framing. Even as he opens with a broader definitional gesture that defines CRSV as "any kind of act, sexual, physical, emotional," he returns, throughout the conversation, to rape as the operative category. Honor also remains at the core of our conversation, as he explains that "this [violence] is the most difficult thing that can happen [...] women would say 'I would rather give you my life, don't touch my honour'." Ultimately, the harm is not what was done to the body, but what the body now signifies, and what its violation costs those around it.

By contrast, neither the imam from Brčko nor the elite religious leader specify a category of violence when speaking of CRSV. The former describes it as "one of the brutal crimes that can be committed in peace or wartime," locating its origins in a "psychological, pathological hatred that exists in a person who wants to humiliate others as much as possible"[21]. The elite religious leader instead situates it within a framework of systematic violence, describing it as "the cheapest weapon that can be used in war" and drawing on ICTY's rulings to underscore its character as a crime against humanity[22]. Notably, both trace much of their understandings of CRSV to seminars organized by the IC on the topic.

Such discourses matter for how religious institutions function as sites of recognition for victims-/survivors. They determine which violations count, whose suffering is recognized and which victims can be expected to elicit institutional redress. When privileging one form of harm above others, discourses risk ranking experiences of CRSV, creating the same hierarchies that patriarchal structures produce more broadly. Nonetheless, partial departures from dominant institutional logics can be consequential (see text footnote 22). By not anchoring CRSV to a specific act, they begin to open the spectrum of recognizable harms. That both leaders connect these understandings with dedicated seminars, moreover, suggests that conservative understandings of CRSV are not immovable, but can be reshaped through informed engagement, an opportunity religious leaders in other contexts often lament lacking (Le Roux et al., 2020).

19 Imam, Central Bosnia Canton, January 2026.

20 Imam, Sarajevo, December 2025.

21 Imam, Brčko District, December 2025.

22 Elite Religious Leader, Sarajevo Canton, March 2025.

5.1.2 Victimhood through gendered lenses

Looking at official statements around CRSV, the use of rape as a reference category is often accompanied by a gendered construction of who this violence is understood to affect and what roles men and women occupy within this experience. A frequency analysis of the gender-specific language used to speak of victims-/survivors (see Table 3) shows that female-specific references appear with considerably greater regularity than male-specific equivalents, a trend that only sharpens once counts are normalized across sources, highlighting in broad strokes how women are presented as the sole victims of this violence.

Yet, frequency alone does not capture the full weight of this pattern. A more granular analysis of the corpus shows that women are often referred to as "acted upon"—whether in terms of the violence itself or of their need for protection. Men, when mentioned at all, are invoked as protectors rather than potential victims themselves. The 1993 Fatwa *A Message to Raped Women* is exemplary in this regard (Nurudin, 1993):

> We especially recommend to men and husbands whose wives have experienced this tragedy that they be strong and brave enough to give their wives a good hug, both literally and figuratively, because this will show that they truly share in their wives' pain, and it will be easier for them too.

The effect of such discursive positioning is two-fold. First, it invites a communal response to CRSV organized around male guardianship. Second, as it consolidates the assumption that this violence only concerns women, it also excludes male survivors from being imaginable recipients of the same solidarity. This replicates a broader pattern in post-conflict contexts where logics of protection not only displace women's agency but also organize institutional responses around their vulnerability (Enloe, 2007). Three decades on, this framework seems to still be present. As the *khutbah* introduces the possibility of men being victims, the text reverts to "raped women" in relation to CRSV for the remainder of the sermon (Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2023). Likewise, despite attempts in the Handbook to use "wartime rape victims," sometimes accompanied by gender-neutral pronouns "it/its," this lexicon is inconsistent, eventually replaced by female-specific language (Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019). In both cases, the use of gender-neutral language fails to reorganize assumptions about female victimhood, performing a cosmetic inclusivity that the rest of the text quietly withdraws from.

Selective gendering is also visible through how other forms of violence are described. Where accounts of torture remain gender-neutral, rape is explicitly feminized[23]. Furthermore, when men are cited as possible victims, statistics are provided only in relation to other conflicts and not for BiH[24], despite evidence already available at the time that male victims may have numbered in the thousands (see Olujic, 1998). Hence, while the possibility of male victimhood is acknowledged, this is never located "at home," and such asymmetries run from the earliest fatwas to the most recent documents. As female victims find their recovery mediated through men who are cast as protectors rather than fellow survivors, male victimization is rendered unspeakable within the very institutional framework that might otherwise offer recognition and support, a dynamic that is shown to spill over into legal and social settings (see Touquet, 2022). Patriarchal norms woven into religious discourses around CRSV, then, do not merely reproduce assumptions about gender but actively organize the institutional framing of who counts as a victim, whose suffering demands a response, and what form that response ought to take.

The imams from Central Bosnia Canton and Sarajevo Canton again firmly reproduce these conservative framings. While the former refers to "raped women and girls," the latter similarly centers women throughout the conversation, recalling efforts to encourage men to marry the women who had survived. When asked whether he was ever approached by male survivors, he acknowledges that "there were indeed cases" but does not elaborate, noting that he personally had no contact with men who had experienced this violence. However, even as his framing aligned most closely with overarching institutional discourses, the imam from Sarajevo recalls being met with resistance from higher levels of the institution when wanting to expand on victims-/survivors stories. Perhaps suggesting that the space for certain stories is limited regardless of how closely one's views align with institutional expectations, this insight highlights the importance of attending to internal institutional dynamics, as they reveal not only where discourses converge, but where and why resistance might emerge.

The imam from Brčko and the elite religious leader depart from this framing to different extents. Asked about who comes to mind when he thinks of those who experienced this violence, the imam speaks of a "few people"[25] and maintains gender neutral language across the conversation. He then recounts the testimony of a woman who confided in him with her personal story, which he defines as "the most traumatic" he has personally experienced. Compared to the other two imams, he offers an understanding of CRSV in which a universalist frame precedes, rather than follows, the specific case. The elite religious leader goes further, describing CRSV as "the worst thing that can happen to someone, be it a man or a woman, because men also suffer, because this is an attack on your personhood, on your integrity." The interview is then woven with accounts of her conversations, and those of religious leaders working alongside her, with victims-/survivors who approach them seeking advice. And, in these stories, all of them are women.

This contrast between discourses and lived practice is worth pausing on. Even when religious leaders maintain a broader framing, this is eventually interrupted by their own experiences, where only women are protagonists. This does not mean unwillingness to speak of male victimization but an impossibility to do so. As Touquet (2022) argues, what is lacking is not the voices of male survivors—increasingly present in research, policy and media—but a public framework capable of receiving them.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid: 62.

25 Imam, Brčko District, December 2025

Men as possible victims unsettle more than women, since they do not fit stereotypes of powerlessness. This incapacity is not unique to religious institutions but reflects broader societal gender norms, with well-documented parallels in both policy and law. Because institutional frameworks default to female victimhood, male experiences of sexual violence are systematically misclassified or rendered invisible: genital violence, forced penetration and sexual torture are often categorized as "torture," which leaves witnesses, doctors, and aid workers without the conceptual framework to name what occurred, let alone report it (Sawyer, 2024). At the policy level, conflating "gender" with "women" leaves male victims-/survivors "a present absence," implicit but never named, even within frameworks designed to address CRSV (Baldwin, 2026, p. 3). The absence of inclusive frameworks may itself make male victims-/survivors less likely to come forward. The result is a compounding silence: exclusive discourses mean fewer disclosures, and fewer disclosures are in turn read as evidence that the framework needs no revision. Each reinforces the other, so that religious institutions, like legal and policy systems around them, remain organized around an understanding of victimhood they have never had cause to revise.

5.1.3 What a victim looks like

Victimhood across elite discourses is feminized and steeped in specific imagery, as shown by a mapping exercise of the adjectives used to describe victims-/survivors in Figure 1. The dominance of "female" as a qualifying term reiterates womanhood as the operative attribute, reinforcing female victimization as the sole thinkable experience of CRSV. Equally telling is the high frequency of the term "raped": shifting from past tense into present, it translates discourses of rape as a defining experience into a defining characteristic. In doing so, not only does the violence become everlasting but so does one's identity, continuously reorganized around the harm itself.

The remaining adjectives, *unfortunate*, *unprotected*, *traumatized*, *humiliated*, *misfortunate*, and *stigmatized*, assign little agency to victim-/survivors. This is significant when contextualized within documents that simultaneously seek to challenge stigma, for to describe a survivor as stigmatized while condemning stigmatization reproduces the very label it rejects. Even the most affirming terms, such as *martyrs* and *heroines*, risk positioning the survivor as an object of pity rather than a person with voice and will, as the president of one survivors' association explains during one interview[26]:

> My shoulders are starting to hurt with all this tapping, "we are heroes, we are heroes." There are people who come up to us and say, "here they are, those who were raped," and want to take pictures with us. We don't need words or recognition. We need action, for some of us to receive a cow so we can produce milk for our children.

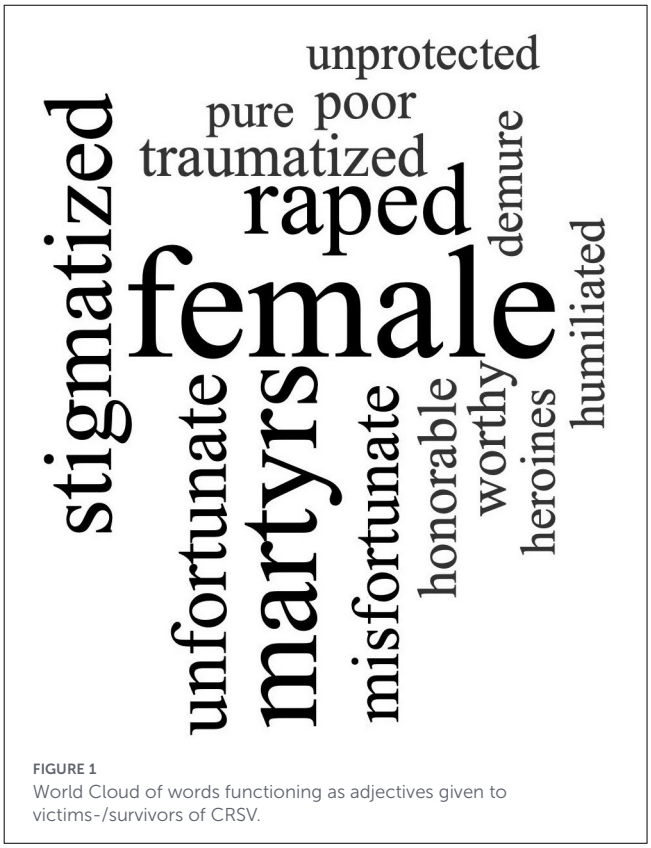

FIGURE 1
World Cloud of words functioning as adjectives given to victims-/survivors of CRSV.

In our interviews, the imams from Sarajevo and Central Bosnia Canton largely reproduce this narrative. Survivors are women who "carry that inside themselves" and whose wounds "are never going to fully heal" (see text footnote 19), positioning CRSV as a permanent condition. Victims-/survivors are described as recipients of communal care and moral obligation, women to be protected, housed, and married off to good men who would "take care" of them (see text footnote 20).

The imam from Brčko departs from this pattern in a way worth dwelling on. He consistently refers to those who experienced CRSV as victims—a choice that, when probed, is explained to be in line with his background in legal studies. When asked whether he distinguishes between the terms victim and survivor, he explains:

> The term victim is something that reflects more pain, more difficult experience that the person has gone through [...] whereas a survivor [...] you can use it in, for example, in a traffic accident [...] a person has been in a traffic accident and they survived, so it feels and sounds like a more softer trauma than the term victim.

The term victim, then, not only conveys the harm experienced but also how persistent its consequences remain. This terminology, he argues, "stays with us for a longer period of time, especially because the judicial processes are very long." By contrast, the elite religious leader uses only the word survivor throughout our entire conversation. When asked about it, she is unequivocal: "I don't like the term victim. I have also taught myself to not use it in

26 Interview with Representative, Association B, Sarajevo, March 2025.

front of them, because they are survivors. They were victims in that moment, and they were not victims afterwards because they survived, so they are survivors"[27]. For her, victimhood belongs to the moment of the crime, not to the person who lived beyond it.

The tension between these two positions is not merely terminological but maps onto a broader divide for how different institutional actors in BiH navigate such language. As the representative of a legal association for victims-/survivors emphasizes during our interview, the word victim is unavoidable in legal settings, since it is the "language used within documents or court proceedings" (see text footnote 1). Outside these contexts, however, her organization deliberately defaults to survivor, because "the word victim would be considered as a word that puts some kind of an etiquette to survivors and would put a definition that they are solely connected to the crime itself, but there is much more that they can give." Crucially, she notes that survivors themselves, in her experience, "want for everybody to call them survivors." Yet, this preference remains fragile:

> If you would stop a regular citizen here in the streets of Sarajevo, they would use the word victim, not because they do not have empathy or understanding, but they do not know the consequences that bringing out the word victim means and brings to the survivors themselves.

Together these accounts illuminate how the language of recognition can itself be a site where patriarchal norms operate. That legal and religious institutions, civil society actors, and victims-/survivors navigate this terminology differently suggests that no single term is objectively more accurate or more respectful than the other. Rather, each carries different weight depending on who is using it and who it is meant to speak for. Recognition, then, is not a matter of settling on the right word, but of making space for the idea that different people, in different contexts, will need different ones.

5.1.4 Whose responsibility is it to support them?

The archival sources are consistent on one point: guilt lies with the perpetrator alone. This is stated explicitly, and stands as the corpus' most unambiguous commitment. Yet how responsibility is distributed—across perpetrators, bystanders, victims, and the wider community—is more complex and at times contradictory than this headline position suggests.

The Handbook presents a clear hierarchy of responsibility for perpetrators, bystanders, and victims in its guidelines for religious leaders. While perpetrators "must understand the gravity of their crimes," thereby placing the burden of moral reckoning on those who committed the violence, bystanders and victims are said to have "a responsibility in the process of their own recovery." Where perpetrators are held accountable for their crimes, victims and bystanders are asked to take ownership of their own healing. The work of recovery is thus individualized, located within the survivor rather than in the collective, the institution, or the state. Even where the institutional ambition is to broaden religious responses to CRSV, the underlying logic of where responsibility for recovery lies remains organized around those affected, rather than on the structures around them.

The interview data adds further texture to these patterns. The imam from Sarajevo recalls fatwas as important to highlight that being victimized "was not their will," a religious legitimation of innocence directed as much at families and communities as at victims-/survivors themselves. The imam from Central Bosnia Canton similarly explains that wherever he can he "emphasize[s] that all victims need our support" and that they must be told "directly or indirectly that they are not guilty." Conversely, the elite religious leader frames responsibility as outward facing. She mentions the failures of state institutions, the insensitivity of officials, the inadequacy of societal awareness and the need to embed education on CRSV in university and school curricula, insisting that "we as a society need to work on this" (see text footnote 30). Her engagement with victims-/survivors is also framed not as helping them rise from humiliation but as learning from their strength, a reversal of the pastoral hierarchy often implicit in the Handbook's (Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019) formulation.

5.2 Children born of wartime rape

The question of children born of wartime rape surfaces only in passing across the corpus, alongside the primary focus on direct victims of this violence. Since this was also not within the scope of the interviews, data is too limited to sustain an extended analysis. Yet, a few considerations are worth noting.

In the fatwa *A Message to Raped Women*, children are discussed in relation to the present—their legal status, their belonging, their mothers' obligations to care for them—and are described almost entirely through their relationship with their mothers (Nurudin, 1993). The fatwa acknowledges the difficulty of their position, saying that they "have not done anything to contribute to their unhappy future," and yet "will carry the marks of violence from which they were born for the rest of their lives." As the experience of their mother becomes the operative definition of their own existence, such discursive gestures bound mother and child together through a violence that characterizes them before they have had the chance to exist beyond it. When the fatwa turns from the present to the future, the discourse shifts. Children are defined as potential redeemers, and they are, unambiguously, male:

> Who knows, maybe the Almighty God wanted to place among those children some kind of future great man who could bring some good to Islam, Muslims, and the rest of the world.

This gendered asymmetry mirrors a broader pattern. As the analysis above has shown, male victims-/survivors of CRSV are largely inaudible across both the corpus and the interviews,

27 Elite Religious Leader, Sarajevo, March 2025.

their experiences displaced by an exclusively female framing of victimhood. However, when it comes to imagining a future, it is boys, and specifically boys growing into men, who anchor the future that is imagined. The stories of those who suffered remain feminized; the stories of those who might redeem that suffering are masculinized. Girls born of wartime rape, like male survivors of it, occupy limited space in these imaginaries. This asymmetry reveals that patriarchal norms organizing religious responses to CRSV may shape not only how victims-/survivors are seen and supported in the present, but what futures are imaginable and for whom. Across this limited body of evidence, children born of wartime rape remain more imagined than known, and what is imagined of them exposes structures of gender and honor through which this violence, and its aftermath, continues to be understood.

5.3 Hierarchies of victimhood: beyond the Islamic Community

A final dimension of the Handbook's framing warrants attention. The Handbook is a product of the Inter-Religious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and as such includes sections by religious leaders of the country's four main denominations (Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019). Yet, across these sections, it is overwhelmingly Muslim victims who appear at the center of discourses around CRSV. The experiences of Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats who were also victimized during the war remain largely absent.

This pattern surfaced continuously during fieldwork. As I set out to conduct interviews with religious leaders from the Catholic and Orthodox communities, these expressed a sense that speaking of CRSV was not their place, even when I made clear that the research would engage with responses to victims-/survivors regardless of their ethnic belonging. When we acknowledge that one group was subjected to CRSV to a much greater extent compared to others, does this inadvertently render victims from other communities invisible? Moreover, does this risk transferring the moral and political accountability of those responsible onto the broader population that was itself victimized? Even when justified by historical and juridical facts, these omissions reproduce a hierarchy of victimhood that may compound, rather than resolve, the legacies of this violence[28].

6 Discussion

This analysis has begun to trace how patriarchal norms operate within institutional discourses of the IC of BiH to construct and delimit responses to CRSV. Read together, and within the limits of this corpus and interview sample, the findings highlight discursive trends relatively stable across time and hierarchical levels, which shape not only how victims-/survivors are seen but what responses to their experiences are imaginable.

The most consistent thread is the construction of victims-/survivors as female and as defined by the experience of violence itself. Throughout the corpus and the interviews, womanhood functions as the operative attribute of victimhood, rape functions as the operative experience of wartime sexual violence and victims-/survivors are positioned as passive recipients of both harm and care. When gender-neutral language is employed in the archival data, it performs an inclusivity that the texts quickly withdraw from, leaving the female raped body as the sole legible subject of institutional concern. The resulting silence around male victimization is self-reinforcing: the lack of discourses that recognize male experiences of CRSV leads to fewer coming forward, which, in turn, means institutions never develop the framework that would make disclosure possible. However, this is not a unique characteristic of religious institutions, either in BiH or beyond. As patriarchal values remain deeply entrenched in Bosnian society (see text footnote 1), stereotypical understandings of victimhood have also influenced judicial outcomes, with officials often declining to classify CRSV against men as such (TRIAL International, 2017). In practice, today male victims-/survivors can at best obtain legal status as victims of torture, formally recognized but held to even harder standards to meet for compensation (Hronešová, 2018)[29]. These insights also speak to broader debates on CRSV. Within the Women, Peace and Security agenda, gender is still too often treated as synonymous with women, resulting in a persistent lack of acknowledgment of how diverse experiences of violence can be and a corresponding gap in policy designed to provide redress for male victims-/survivors (Baldwin, 2026). Addressing this gap requires confronting the gendered assumptions that continue to shape how religious, judicial and political institutions alike recognize and respond to CRSV.

This discursive architecture travels, unevenly, across the IC. The imams whose framings most closely mirror the archival corpus tend to reproduce the construction of victimhood even under gender-neutral prompting, suggesting that the dominant logic shapes not only what is said but what can be imagined. The burden of recovery in these accounts tends to fall not on institutions or states, but on communities' goodwill and pastoral authority. Even the most affirmative gestures seem to mediate recovery through the protective capacity of male relatives, reasserting the patriarchal character of these framings.

However, these discourses are not seamless. Part of this divergence may be generational: the first two imams were already active during the war, while the imam from Brčko and the elite religious leader were only teenagers at the time. Neither fully escapes the patriarchal frame of the institution within which they

28 For a more extensive discussion on hierarchies of victimhood in BiH (see Clark, 2023).

29 The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina has a *Law on the Protection of Civilian Victims of War*, which recognises several categories of victims by granting them special legal status. These categories include victims of conflict-related sexual violence, children born of wartime rape, civilian with disabilities—in the specific degree of 60% of proven bodily harm—victims of torture and killed or missing persons (TRIAL International, 2023; ICMP, 2007). However, not only the judicial process to obtain such status is cumbersome and presents high risks of re-traumatization, but even in the case of what is seen as perhaps the most salient category of victims—that of persons that experienced CRSV—victims-/survivors face difficulties to obtain this status and receive full compensation, many of whom still waiting to this day (BIRN, 2026).

operate; yet both interrupt it meaningfully. While the former offers a broader understanding of victimhood, it is the elite representative who departs most from the dominant discourse. Her account of responsibility—outward-facing, collective and demanding of institutions rather than of victims-/survivors—negotiates more conservative logics, as does her language around recovery. Both these leaders' engagement in events and training on the topic suggests that these might be precisely the spaces in which much of their understanding of CRSV is shaped.

The implications of these findings are twofold. First, even within a sample this limited, "religious leaders" should be disaggregated by role and function, a distinction largely absent from research and policy. Doing so provides a fuller picture of how each tier engages with the phenomenon of CRSV and how these interact to shape institutional responses to it. It also reveals precisely the spaces where norms might already be negotiated upon, which interventions most often overlook when they focus solely on individual leaders at the grassroots level. Second, partnerships with international actors require closer attention to the normative architecture within which religious discourses unfold. As the analysis of the Handbook suggests, collaboration does not automatically displace patriarchal logics (Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019). Where frameworks remain organized around the same assumptions, the ambitions of such collaborations risk remaining procedural. Gender bias, in short, should be examined both at the individual level and at the level where it becomes systematized within institutions at home and beyond.

A final observation concerns the asymmetry between the (in)visibility of adult male survivors and of male children born of wartime rape, a pattern that falls outside the focus of this enquiry but is worth flagging for more dedicated research. Where the documents project forward to what children might become, male children are more easily incorporated into a discourse of communal resilience and redemption that remains unavailable to both female survivors, whose identity is organized around what was done to them, and male survivors, whose experiences cannot be heard. The present, on this reading, belongs to the violated mother; the future belongs to the son. Patriarchal norms, in other words, also dictate who carries the future's promise. Just as it is important not to simply "add men and stir" (Schulz and Lewis, 2025), intervention efforts should also disaggregate the category of *womenandchildren*, attending to how the gendered experiences of boys and girls are shaped by social structures. Locally, this could mean nuanced evaluations of the needs and experiences of children born of wartime rape, thereby informing more responsive support and shifting societal attitudes away from stigmatization. In BiH, much of this groundwork has already been laid by several organizations and pioneered by the Forgotten Children of War Association, whose sustained advocacy and awareness-raising with the public, institutions and schools offers a model that policy should build on and formalize rather than duplicate.

7 Conclusion

Three decades after the end of the war, patriarchal norms continue to shape religious institutional responses to CRSV in BiH. This article has shown that these norms can determine what can be said about wartime sexual violence, who is recognized as a victim-/survivor, and what responses to their suffering are rendered imaginable. Within the corpus and interviews analyzed, patriarchal norms take distinct discursive forms across institutional tiers and are at times negotiated. Even so, the resulting framework largely rests on female victimhood and rape, leaving male victimization and other forms of CRSV unspoken about. In practice, elite and grassroots strategies of support—be it public statements or private conversations—seem to be able to only partially address the plethora of possible CRSV experiences. For those whose suffering is acknowledged, this recognition is often organized around the harm they lived and their need for protection, rather than their agency or claims to justice. Stereotypical understandings of this violence also seem to persist in collaborative efforts with international actors, suggesting that engagement with religious institutions can occur without necessarily displacing the assumptions that produce these exclusions.

Finally, what the Bosnian case renders visible is why religious institutions are consequential sites for norms' reproduction. Trusted, embedded in everyday life, and invested with a normative authority that reaches across the continuum of war and peace, they do not merely reflect societal understandings of CRSV but participate in producing them. Mapping this architecture, and the spaces within it where norms are already being negotiated, might thus be the necessary knowledge for designing interventions that engage religious institutions effectively.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Swedish Ethical Review Authority, Application Number 2024-02253-01. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The ethics committee/institutional review board waived the requirement of written informed consent for participation from the participants or the participants' legal guardians/next of kin because to protect confidentiality of participants on a sensitive topic such as the one researched. Oral informed consent was obtained instead.

Author contributions

MP: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation,

Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2026.1884764/full#supplementary-material

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