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The Costs of Silence: Failed Postwar Trauma Resolution in Poland and Survivor-Led Repair in South Korea

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Abstract

This comparative qualitative case study examines how postwar responses to conflict-related sexual violence shape the psychological transmission—or interruption—of trauma across generations. Focusing on two historically distinct yet structurally comparable contexts—post-Second World War Poland and post-colonial South Korea—the article investigates how enforced silence versus survivor-led testimony affects the embodiment, symbolization, and intergenerational inheritance of trauma. Drawing on psychoanalytic trauma theory, clinical observations, narrative analysis, and interdisciplinary research on embodied and epigenetic transmission, the study situates sexual violence in war not only as an acute traumatic event but as a long-term psychological condition mediated by political and social environments. In the Polish case, sexual violence perpetrated by Soviet "liberators" was rendered politically unspeakable under postwar communist rule, resulting in prolonged silence, blocked mourning, and the absence of social witnessing. Psychologically, this enforced silence prevented narrative integration, forcing trauma into somatic and relational channels and facilitating its transmission across generations through affect regulation, attachment patterns, and family systems (Danieli, 1998; van der Kolk, 2014). In contrast, the South Korean case illustrates how decades of denial surrounding Japanese military sexual slavery were partially transformed through public survivor testimony beginning in the early 1990s. The *halmoni* movement and the ongoing Wednesday Demonstrations created collective spaces of witnessing and ritualized remembrance, enabling trauma to shift from embodied secrecy toward symbolic articulation and shared meaning (Caruth, 1995; Assmann, 2011). Building on these contrasting trajectories, the article employs the framework of War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) (Rebecka, 2021) developed by the author of the article to conceptualize trauma as transgenerational, embodied, and politically mediated. Rather than introducing WRSS as

a diagnostic category, the study applies it comparatively to demonstrate how psychological trauma transmission is sustained or interrupted depending on the availability of social recognition and symbolic containment. The findings suggest that the prevention of transgenerational trauma does not depend solely on individual treatment but on postwar environments that allow traumatic memory to move from the body into language, relationships, and collective acknowledgment. In this sense, WRSS reframes trauma not as a static aftermath of war but as a dynamic psychological process whose transmission—and prevention—is shaped by historical and social conditions.

Keywords

Embodied Memory, Intergenerational Trauma, Institutional Silence Psychoanalytic Trauma Theory, Sexual Violence in War, Transgenerational Trauma Prevention, War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS)

1. Introduction

Conflict-related sexual violence remains one of the most persistent yet least adequately addressed legacies of modern warfare. While extensive scholarship has documented rape as a tactic of war, far less attention has been paid to how postwar political systems determine whether such violence becomes socially acknowledged, collectively mourned, or structurally silenced—and how these divergent responses shape the long-term transmission of trauma across generations. This article argues that the aftermath of wartime sexual violence cannot be understood solely through individual psychopathology or clinical symptom clusters, but must be examined as a political and embodied process, shaped by state narratives, institutional recognition, and collective memory practices.

Drawing on a qualitative comparative case study of two historically distinct yet structurally resonant contexts—post-Second World War Poland and post-colonial South Korea—this article develops the theory of War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) as a framework for understanding how sexual violence in war becomes either entrenched through silence or transformed through public witnessing, with profound implications for intergenerational trauma transmission and conflict prevention.

The Polish and Korean cases illuminate two contrasting political ecologies of trauma. In Poland, sexual violence committed by Soviet soldiers during and after the Red Army's advance in 1944-1945 was rendered unspeakable under the postwar socialist regime, where the Red Army's status as "liberator" was foundational to state legitimacy. In South Korea, by contrast, survivors of the Japanese military "comfort-station" system endured decades of denial before eventually transforming their embodied trauma into sustained public testimony and political activism. These divergent trajectories provide a unique analytical lens for examining how acknowledgment versus denial functions as a decisive variable in the social life of

trauma.

Research on wartime sexual violence has demonstrated that rape is not an incidental by-product of conflict but a systematic practice embedded in military strategy, gendered power relations, and symbolic domination (Enloe, 2000; Clark, 2019). However, the political status of the perpetrating force profoundly shapes whether such violence can later be named. Sexual violence committed by an enemy occupier can often be incorporated into narratives of national victimhood; sexual violence committed by a "liberating" force destabilizes the moral architecture of post-war legitimacy.

In post-war Poland, this destabilization proved intolerable to the emerging communist state. Following the country's incorporation into the Soviet sphere of influence, public discourse, historiography, and academic research were subordinated to an ideological narrative that portrayed the Red Army exclusively as heroic liberators (Paczkowski, 2003; Applebaum, 2012). Within this framework, acknowledgment of rape by Soviet soldiers constituted political treason. Survivors were denied legal recognition, medical documentation, and symbolic legitimacy, while researchers were structurally prevented from collecting data through archives, courts, or clinical institutions.

This political silencing produced what memory scholars describe as organized forgetting—a deliberate erasure enforced through censorship, fear, and moral pressure (Connerton, 2008; Assmann, 2011). Importantly, this silence was not merely discursive. It shaped bodies, relationships, and family systems, producing long-term patterns of hypervigilance, somatic distress, avoidance of medical care, and intergenerational transmission of fear—phenomena well documented in trauma and epigenetic research (Danieli, 1998; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018).

The absence of conventional data on Soviet-perpetrated sexual violence in Poland has often been misinterpreted as evidentiary weakness. This article adopts a different position: absence itself is treated as data. Following Stoler's (2009) work on colonial archives, the lack of records is understood not as a historical void but as evidence of political suppression. Silence becomes a methodological object rather than a limitation.

Trauma research has consistently shown that delayed disclosure, fragmented memory, and somatic expression are normative responses to overwhelming violence—particularly when disclosure entails danger or punishment (Herman, 1992; Brewin, 2014). In politically repressive environments, survivors' reliance on bodily expression rather than narrative memory is not pathological but adaptive. Consequently, WRSS conceptualizes embodied memory—encompassing posture, affect regulation, startle responses, and relational patterns—as legitimate empirical material.

This methodological stance challenges positivist hierarchies of evidence that privilege contemporaneous documentation over lived experience. It aligns with qualitative trauma scholarship, psychoanalysis, and decolonial methodologies that emphasize relational, embodied, and intergenerational forms of knowing

(Laub, 1995; Smith & Freyd, 2014).

2. A Contrasting Trajectory: From Silence to Testimony in South Korea

The second case examined in this article—the Korean "comfort-women" movement—offers a contrasting trajectory that underscores the political contingency of trauma outcomes. During the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910-1945), tens of thousands of women were subjected to systematic sexual enslavement by the Japanese military. Following the war, survivors encountered decades of denial, stigma, and geopolitical silencing, particularly after the normalization treaty between Japan and South Korea in 1965, which prioritized diplomatic relations over justice (Soh, 2008).

Yet beginning in the early 1990s, Korean survivors—known as *halmoni*—initiated public testimony that fundamentally altered national and international understandings of wartime sexual violence. The weekly Wednesday Demonstrations in Seoul, ongoing since 1992, transformed private suffering into collective witnessing and sustained moral pressure. This movement illustrates how public acknowledgment can interrupt intergenerational trauma transmission, converting embodied memory into political agency.

From a trauma-theoretical perspective, this shift demonstrates the central role of social witnessing. As Laub (1995) argued, trauma that is not witnessed remains frozen; when testimony is received within a collective holding environment, it can be metabolized rather than transmitted as silent distress. The Korean case thus provides empirical grounding for WRSS's central claim: trauma outcomes are shaped not only by the violence itself but by the post-violence political ecology.

3. Intergenerational Transmission and Epigenetic Corroboration

Across both cases, intergenerational transmission emerges as a key analytic dimension. Research on descendants of Holocaust and war-rape survivors has documented altered stress-response regulation, increased vulnerability to anxiety and somatic disorders, and distinctive relational patterns (Danieli, 1998; Yehuda et al., 2016). Epigenetic studies have demonstrated changes in gene methylation associated with the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, suggesting a biological embedding of trauma across generations.

Epigenetic research is referenced here as corroborative rather than causal evidence. While studies by Yehuda and colleagues demonstrate biological correlates of trauma exposure across generations, this article does not claim direct biological transmission in the Polish or Korean cases. Instead, epigenetic findings are used to support a theoretical model in which biological vulnerability interacts dynamically with social recognition, symbolic containment, and relational environments.

WRSS integrates these findings within a political framework, arguing that biological transmission cannot be disentangled from social conditions. Where trauma remains publicly unacknowledged—as in post-war Poland—descendants inherit not only altered stress physiology but a cultural environment hostile to disclosure. Where trauma is collectively witnessed—as in South Korea—descendants inherit narratives of resistance alongside vulnerability.

The comparative framework developed in this article extends trauma theory into the domain of trauma-inherent prevention. Unacknowledged sexual violence does not remain confined to the past; it shapes contemporary political cultures, influencing attitudes toward gender, authority, and violence. Denial reproduces conditions under which sexual violence can recur, while acknowledgment fosters ethical accountability and social resilience.

WRSS reframes trauma not as an endpoint of violence but as a predictive indicator. Societies that refuse to integrate histories of sexual violence are more likely to replicate patterns of institutional betrayal, victim silencing, and moral disengagement. Conversely, societies that create spaces for embodied memory and testimony demonstrate greater capacity for prevention, reconciliation, and peacebuilding.

4. Research Aim and Contribution

This article, therefore, asks:

How do different political responses to wartime sexual violence shape embodied and intergenerational trauma transmission, and what does this reveal about trauma-informed conflict prevention and the prevention of the inheritance of war trauma?

By comparing enforced silence in post-war Poland with survivor-led testimony in South Korea, the study advances three core contributions:

1) Theoretical: It develops WRSS as a political-embodied framework integrating trauma theory, psychoanalysis, epigenetics, and memory studies.

2) Methodological: It legitimizes silence, embodiment, and intergenerational transmission as empirical data in contexts of political repression.

3) Practical: It positions acknowledgment of sexual violence as a necessary component of sustainable peace and conflict prevention.

In doing so, the article challenges individualized trauma models and argues for a trauma-informed political ecology, in which healing, justice, and prevention are inextricably linked.

5. Postwar Poland: Silence as a Mechanism of Transgenerational Trauma Transmission

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Poland entered a paradoxical historical period in which liberation from Nazi occupation coincided with the consolidation of Soviet political domination. The advance of the Red Army in 1944-1945 was officially framed as rescue and salvation, yet for many Polish

women it involved widespread sexual violence perpetrated by soldiers whose status as "liberators" rendered them politically untouchable. This contradiction was not merely historical but psychological: to name rape committed by the liberating force was to threaten the ideological legitimacy of the postwar state, making disclosure socially unintelligible and potentially dangerous (Applebaum, 2012; Paczkowski, 2003).

Under the emerging communist regime, public memory was tightly regulated through censorship, surveillance, and the restructuring of legal, medical, and historical institutions to align with Soviet authority. Sexual violence committed by Soviet forces could neither be officially recorded nor legally prosecuted, and it was excluded from historical documentation and public discourse (Gross, 2001; Snyder, 2010). This structural erasure did not simply silence survivors; it actively obstructed the psychological processes required for trauma integration. Without social recognition, symbolic acknowledgment, or external witnessing, traumatic experience could not be transformed into narrative memory and instead remained unprocessed and embodied (Herman, 1992; Laub, 1995).

From a psychotraumatological perspective, this form of political silencing functioned as enforced dissociation. Survivors learned that psychic survival depended on not articulating what had occurred, maintaining internal containment through silence and emotional constriction. The absence of social acknowledgment prevented the formation of coherent autobiographical memory, leaving traumatic memory to persist primarily in somatic and affective form—as chronic pain, hyperarousal, exaggerated startle responses, avoidance of bodily exposure, and persistent autonomic dysregulation (van der Kolk, 2014). What could not be spoken was instead regulated through bodily vigilance and rigid relational control.

These adaptations were protective within the immediate postwar environment, where disclosure carried real political and social risk. However, over time, they produced enduring consequences within family systems. Silence became a mode of attachment and communication. Children grew up within relational atmospheres shaped by unarticulated fear, emotional inhibition, and heightened sensitivity to threat. Psychological transmission occurred not through explicit narrative but through affect regulation, posture, tone of voice, and patterns of emotional distance or overcontrol—mechanisms well documented in the literature on transgenerational trauma (Danieli, 1998; Kellermann, 2001).

Crucially, the political demand for silence transformed individual traumatic experience into a transgenerational psychological condition. Because the original violence could not be named or contextualized, subsequent generations inherited its effects without narrative grounding, often manifesting as anxiety, mistrust, somatic distress, or diffuse hypervigilance disconnected from conscious historical knowledge (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). In this sense, postwar Poland illustrates how state-imposed forgetting does not eliminate trauma but reorganizes it into embodied and familial forms. Silence functioned not as resolution but as a vector of trauma transmission, ensuring that the psychological aftermath of war remained

active long after the violence itself had ended.

6. Postwar South Korea: From Silenced Trauma to Symbolized Memory

South Korea's postwar trajectory reveals a different, though initially parallel, entanglement of political history and psychological trauma. During Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945), tens of thousands of Korean women were subjected to systematic sexual enslavement within the Japanese military's "comfort-station" system (Soh, 2008). Following the war, however, this violence remained publicly unacknowledged. Cold War geopolitics, rapid nation-building, and normalization agreements with Japan prioritized economic recovery and diplomatic stability over survivor recognition, while deeply entrenched patriarchal norms framed sexual violation as a source of shame rather than injustice (Lind, 2008).

Psychologically, this postwar context produced conditions similar to those observed in Poland: prolonged silence, social invalidation, and blocked mourning. Survivors carried their traumatic experiences privately for decades, often without language, witnesses, or social containment. The absence of acknowledgment prevented symbolic processing, leaving traumatic memory embodied and shaping long-term affect regulation, physical health, and interpersonal functioning. For many survivors, the body became the primary repository of memory, bearing the imprint of violence in somatic symptoms and chronic stress responses (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2014).

What distinguishes the Korean case is not the absence of trauma, but the later emergence of historical conditions that enabled psychological symbolization. Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, processes of democratization opened new public spaces for speech and dissent. When survivors first testified publicly in 1991, this moment represented not only a political rupture but a profound psychological shift: experiences that had been carried in isolation were, for the first time, received and validated by others.

The weekly Wednesday Demonstrations that followed functioned as a form of collective psychological containment. Through repetition, ritual, and public presence, these gatherings provided survivors with a stable external witness, allowing traumatic experience to be gradually transformed into narrative and symbolic memory. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the demonstrations created a shared holding environment in which shame could be externalized and meaning co-constructed (Laub, 1995; Winnicott, 1960). Trauma was no longer confined to individual bodies but was distributed across a social field capable of recognition and response.

This transformation had significant implications for transgenerational transmission. Descendants of survivors did not inherit silence alone; they inherited stories, symbols, and moral frameworks through which the past could be understood and integrated. Although pain did not disappear, it became contextualized rather than enigmatic. The psychological burden carried forward was no longer raw, un-

processed terror but articulated memory, enabling continuity without unconscious repetition (Assmann, 2011; Hirsch, 2012).

Thus, South Korea demonstrates how changes in historical and political conditions—specifically the availability of public witnessing and symbolic recognition—can alter the psychological fate of trauma. Where silence once enforced embodied transmission, testimony enabled integration. Trauma remained part of collective history, but it ceased to function as an unprocessed inheritance, illustrating how the conditions of acknowledgment can interrupt transgenerational trauma transmission.

7. From History to Psychology: Why These Two Vignettes Require a Shared Analytic Framework (WRSS)

At first glance, postwar Poland and postwar South Korea appear to occupy distinct historical, cultural, and geopolitical worlds. One emerged from the devastation of Nazi occupation only to be absorbed into the Soviet sphere of influence; the other transitioned from Japanese colonial rule into Cold War partition and authoritarian modernization. Their languages, religions, political trajectories, and collective identities differ substantially. Yet when examined through the lens of psychological aftermath rather than geopolitical narrative, these two contexts reveal a strikingly convergent structure of trauma. In both cases, conflict-related sexual violence was followed not by acknowledgment or mourning but by prolonged silence, social invalidation, and institutional refusal to witness. It is this convergence—rather than the surface differences—that necessitates a shared analytic framework capable of capturing how trauma persists, moves, and transforms across generations.

What unites these cases psychologically is not the violence itself, but the conditions under which that violence was forced to be remembered—or not remembered—after the war ended. Trauma research has long established that overwhelming events do not become traumatic solely because of their intensity, but because of the failure of integration that follows them (Herman, 1992). Integration requires more than survival; it requires recognition, symbolic meaning, and relational containment. When these are absent, traumatic memory does not resolve with time. Instead, it remains active, shaping physiology, affect regulation, attachment, and interpersonal expectations (van der Kolk, 2014). Both Poland and South Korea demonstrate this dynamic with particular clarity.

In postwar Poland, the political impossibility of naming rape committed by Soviet "liberators" created a context in which survivors were denied every pathway through which traumatic experience might be psychologically processed. There was no legal acknowledgment, no medical validation, no cultural language, and no permissible public memory. Silence was not merely encouraged; it was structurally enforced. From a psychological perspective, this amounted to a systematic foreclosure of symbolization. A traumatic experience cannot be translated into narrative memory, which is essential for contextualizing fear, grief, and violation

within a meaningful framework of time (Laub, 1995). Instead, memory remained fragmented, implicit, and embodied.

South Korea initially reproduced a similar psychological landscape. Survivors of Japanese military sexual slavery lived for decades under conditions of denial, shame, and social isolation. Although the political context differed, the psychological consequences were strikingly parallel. The absence of acknowledgment blocked mourning and forced survivors to manage trauma privately, often through somatic symptoms, emotional constriction, and relational withdrawal. In both societies, trauma survived not as a story but as a state of being, shaping how bodies anticipated danger and how relationships were organized around avoidance, control, or silence.

These parallels raise a critical psychological question: if trauma manifests so similarly across disparate historical contexts, what is the underlying mechanism that sustains it? Traditional trauma models, focused primarily on individual psychopathology, offer only partial answers. Diagnoses such as PTSD or complex PTSD describe symptom clusters but do not adequately explain why trauma persists across generations, or why its expression often intensifies rather than diminishes in descendants (Kellermann, 2001). Nor do they account for the decisive role played by political and social environments in shaping whether trauma can be integrated or remains unresolved.

The Polish and Korean cases suggest that trauma cannot be fully understood without attending to the relational and symbolic environment in which survivors are embedded. Trauma is not only an internal wound; it is a relational rupture that requires external repair. When societies refuse to acknowledge sexual violence—particularly when perpetrators are politically protected—this refusal becomes a secondary trauma, often more enduring than the original violation (Herman, 1992). Survivors are forced into a paradoxical psychological position: they must live with the knowledge of what happened while simultaneously behaving as if it did not happen. This internal contradiction fosters dissociation, chronic hyperarousal, and somatic distress, which then become the primary modes through which trauma is expressed and transmitted.

It is at this juncture that the two cases begin to diverge in psychologically decisive ways. While Poland remained locked in a regime of silence for decades, South Korea eventually underwent a historical shift that altered the psychological fate of trauma. Democratization and survivor-led activism created public spaces in which testimony became possible. When survivors first spoke publicly in the early 1990s, they did more than disclose personal suffering; they transformed the relational conditions under which trauma was held. For the first time, traumatic memories encountered witnesses capable of receiving, validating, and collectively carrying them (Soh, 1996).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, this shift can be understood as the emergence of a holding environment at the societal level (Winnicott, 1960). Trauma that had been sealed within individual bodies and family systems was redistrib-

uted into a social field capable of containment. The weekly repetition of the Wednesday Demonstrations functioned as a stabilizing ritual, allowing memory to be revisited without overwhelming the psyche. Repetition, in this context, did not signify pathological reenactment but gradual symbolization—the slow transformation of embodied terror into shared meaning (Laub, 1995).

This transformation had profound implications for transgenerational transmission. Research on descendants of trauma survivors has demonstrated that when traumatic experience remains unspoken and uncontextualized, it is more likely to be transmitted implicitly through affect regulation, attachment patterns, and stress physiology (Danieli, 1998; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). Children and grandchildren inherit heightened vigilance, anxiety, and somatic sensitivity without understanding their origin. Trauma becomes enigmatic, generating fear without narrative. By contrast, when trauma is symbolized—when it is named, contextualized, and held within collective memory—descendants inherit stories rather than silence. The past remains painful, but it is no longer unlocatable.

The contrast between Poland and South Korea thus illuminates a core psychological principle: trauma transmission is not determined solely by exposure to violence, but by the availability of symbolic mediation afterward. Where symbolic mediation is blocked, trauma remains embodied and transmissible. Where it becomes possible, trauma can be integrated and its transmission attenuated. This principle cannot be adequately captured by models that treat trauma as an individual disorder detached from social context. It requires a framework that recognizes trauma as simultaneously embodied, relational, transgenerational, and politically mediated.

It is precisely this need that gives rise to the War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) framework (Rebecka, 2025). WRSS does not propose a new diagnostic category or seek to replace existing trauma diagnoses. Instead, it offers a psychological model of how unresolved sexual violence in war becomes organized across bodies, families, and generations when acknowledgment is denied. The Polish and Korean cases do not merely illustrate WRSS; they reveal why such a framework is necessary.

WRSS conceptualizes trauma as transgenerational, not in the metaphorical sense of "inherited pain," but in the concrete psychological sense documented by clinical, attachment, and epigenetic research. When traumatic experiences cannot be symbolized, they are carried forward through implicit memory systems, shaping stress responses and relational expectations in descendants (van der Kolk, 2014; Yehuda et al., 2016). WRSS also emphasizes embodiment as a central mechanism of transmission. In both vignettes, the body emerges as the primary archive of unacknowledged violence—holding memory in muscle tension, autonomic dysregulation, and somatic symptoms long after explicit recall is unavailable.

Crucially, WRSS foregrounds political mediation as a psychological variable. Political regimes do not merely shape historical narratives; they shape psychic

possibilities. By determining what can be spoken, acknowledged, and mourned, states and institutions influence whether trauma is processed or encrypted. In Poland, the political prohibition against naming Soviet-perpetrated rape forced trauma into the body and family system. In South Korea, the eventual relaxation of political constraints allowed trauma to move outward into language and collective ritual. These are not abstract sociological differences; they have measurable psychological consequences.

The necessity of a shared analytic framework becomes even clearer when considering prevention—not in the sense of preventing war itself, but in the psychological sense of preventing the transmission of trauma to subsequent generations. The Polish case demonstrates that silence does not neutralize trauma; it preserves it in latent form, increasing the likelihood that it will reappear as anxiety, mistrust, or somatic distress in descendants. The Korean case demonstrates that acknowledgment, even when delayed, can alter the trajectory of trauma transmission by transforming embodied memory into symbolic knowledge.

WRSS allows these dynamics to be understood as part of a single psychological continuum rather than as culturally isolated phenomena. It provides language for describing how trauma becomes institutionalized through silence and how it can be partially repaired through witnessing. Importantly, WRSS does not romanticize testimony or suggest that speaking alone heals trauma. Rather, it emphasizes the conditions under which testimony becomes psychologically reparative: sustained witnessing, collective validation, and symbolic containment. Without these conditions, disclosure can be retraumatizing rather than integrative (Herman, 1992).

By situating Poland and South Korea within a shared analytic framework, WRSS also challenges assumptions that transgenerational trauma is inevitable or biologically predetermined. While epigenetic research has demonstrated alterations in stress-response systems among descendants of trauma survivors, these findings do not imply fixed destiny (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). Instead, they underscore the plasticity of trauma transmission and the role of environment in shaping outcomes. Political and social contexts that enable symbolization can mitigate the psychological burden passed to future generations.

In this sense, the move from history to psychology is not a shift away from empirical grounding but a deepening of it. The historical facts of sexual violence, political repression, and delayed acknowledgment are inseparable from their psychological consequences. To analyze one without the other is to miss the mechanism through which trauma persists. WRSS emerges here not as an abstract theory but as a necessary interpretive bridge—one that allows the psychological life of history to be traced across time, bodies, and relationships.

The Polish and Korean vignettes thus require a shared analytic framework because they reveal the same underlying psychological process operating under different historical conditions. Trauma, when denied symbolic space, is carried forward in embodied and relational form. When symbolic space becomes avail-

able, trauma can be integrated and its transmission reduced. WRSS names this process and provides the conceptual tools needed to analyze it comparatively. Without such a framework, the similarities between these cases risk being dismissed as coincidence or reduced to cultural idiosyncrasy. With it, they become evidence of a general psychological principle: the fate of trauma is determined not only by what happened, but by how it was allowed—or forbidden—to be remembered.

At this juncture, it is important to clarify the epistemic status of War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) within this article. WRSS is advanced here as an analytic and interpretive framework, not as a normative or prescriptive model, nor as a diagnostic category or policy directive. Its purpose is to make visible the psychological mechanisms through which unresolved sexual violence in war becomes organized, embodied, and transmitted across generations under specific historical conditions. While the framework carries ethical implications, these arise from the empirical and theoretical analysis itself rather than from a priori moral agenda. The comparative cases examined in this article are not mobilized to advocate particular political solutions, but to illuminate how differing postwar environments shape the psychological fate of trauma. In this sense, WRSS does not prescribe what societies ought to do; it delineates what occurs—psychologically and relationally—when acknowledgment is foreclosed or made possible, allowing implications to follow analytically rather than normatively.

8. War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) as a Psychological Model of Transgenerational Trauma

Unlike Complex PTSD, which remains anchored in individual psychopathology, and unlike historical trauma frameworks that privilege collective memory over psychological mechanism, War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) conceptualizes trauma as a politically mediated psychological condition. WRSS foregrounds the role of postwar acknowledgment, institutional betrayal, and enforced silence in shaping whether trauma is symbolized or transmitted implicitly across generations. Its added value lies in identifying political mediation as a constitutive psychological variable rather than a contextual backdrop.

War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) is also proposed as a psychological model for understanding how sexual violence in war becomes embedded, transmitted, and transformed across generations when acknowledgment, symbolization, and social witnessing are absent or delayed. WRSS does not describe a discrete clinical disorder, nor does it replace established trauma diagnoses such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or complex PTSD. Rather, it conceptualizes a patterned psychological condition of inheritance, in which unresolved trauma following war rape reorganizes bodily regulation, attachment, relational expectations, and meaning-making within families and social contexts over time.

The need for such a model emerges from a growing body of trauma research

demonstrating that the psychological consequences of extreme violence often extend beyond the individual survivor and persist across generations, even when descendants have not been directly exposed to the original traumatic event (Danieli, 1998; Kellermann, 2001; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). While existing frameworks describe transgenerational trauma as a phenomenon, they frequently lack an integrated account of how political silence, embodied memory, and relational transmission interact to sustain or interrupt that process. WRSS seeks to address this gap by positioning transgenerational trauma not as an abstract legacy, but as a psychologically mediated system shaped by historical conditions.

9. WRSS as a Non-Diagnostic Psychological Framework

WRSS is intentionally framed as a conceptual and clinical-theoretical model rather than a diagnostic entity. Contemporary trauma research has increasingly recognized the limitations of diagnostic frameworks that individualize suffering while obscuring the relational and historical conditions under which trauma persists (van der Kolk, 2014; Herman, 2022). In cases of war rape, particularly those followed by institutional denial or political repression, trauma cannot be adequately understood as an individual pathology alone. The survivor's symptoms are inseparable from the social environment that refused recognition and from the family systems that adapted to silence as a condition of survival.

Within WRSS, the core unit of analysis is therefore not the isolated survivor, but the trauma-bearing relational field: the survivor, their descendants, and the symbolic environment in which memory is either blocked or allowed to form. This approach aligns relational and attachment-based trauma theories, which emphasize that trauma is fundamentally a disruption of connection and meaning rather than a discrete internal injury (Fonagy et al., 2018; Schore, 2019).

A central premise of WRSS is that trauma is transmitted even in the absence of explicit memory or narrative. Descendants do not inherit the event itself; they inherit its psychological consequences. Research on children and grandchildren of survivors of genocide, war, rape, and political terror has consistently shown elevated levels of anxiety, hypervigilance, affect dysregulation, somatic symptoms, and relational insecurity, often without conscious knowledge of the originating trauma (Yehuda et al., 2016; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018).

WRSS conceptualizes this transmission as occurring through multiple, interconnected pathways. Attachment research has demonstrated that caregivers' unresolved trauma shapes emotional availability, attunement, and stress regulation, thereby influencing children's internal working models of safety and threat (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 2016). At the same time, trauma psychology has shown that unintegrated traumatic experience is more likely to be expressed through implicit memory systems—bodily states, emotional reactions, and behavioral patterns—rather than through explicit narrative recall (van der Kolk, 2014).

In this sense, WRSS treats transgenerational trauma not as the passing down of stories, but as the passing down of unprocessed states. Descendants may inherit fear without context, vigilance without an identifiable threat, or shame without a narrative origin. These experiences often manifest clinically as diffuse anxiety, chronic somatic complaints, difficulties with trust, or an enduring sense of danger that appears disproportionate to current circumstances.

Embodiment occupies a central position within WRSS. When traumatic experience cannot be symbolized—because speaking is dangerous, forbidden, or socially invalidated—it is carried primarily in the body. Contemporary neuroscience and trauma research have demonstrated that overwhelming stress alters autonomic regulation, endocrine functioning, and neural integration, leaving long-term imprints on bodily systems responsible for threat detection and emotional regulation (Porges, 2011; van der Kolk, 2014).

WRSS integrates these findings with psychoanalytic understandings of somatic memory. Trauma that cannot be mentalized or narrated does not disappear; it is stored in procedural and sensory systems, shaping posture, muscle tone, startle responses, and patterns of avoidance or control (Ogden et al., 2006). Over time, these embodied adaptations become normalized within family systems, forming a silent language through which trauma is communicated to subsequent generations.

Epigenetic research further supports this embodied dimension. Studies conducted since 2010 have shown that extreme stress can influence gene expression related to stress response systems, with measurable effects observed in the offspring of trauma survivors (Yehuda et al., 2016; Vukojevic et al., 2014). WRSS does not interpret these findings deterministically. Instead, it situates biological transmission within a broader psychological and relational context, emphasizing that epigenetic vulnerability interacts dynamically with environmental conditions, including recognition, safety, and meaning-making.

10. Political Mediation as a Psychological Variable

What distinguishes WRSS from other models of transgenerational trauma is its explicit recognition of political and institutional silence as psychologically active forces. Trauma theory has increasingly acknowledged that social acknowledgment is a critical component of recovery (Herman, 1992; 2022). When states, institutions, or communities deny or erase experiences of sexual violence, they do not merely fail to help survivors; they actively shape the psychological form trauma takes.

Within WRSS, political repression, denial, or minimization are understood as external regulators of psychic possibility. They determine whether traumatic experience can be named, mourned, and contextualized, or whether it must remain unspoken and embodied. In contexts such as postwar Poland, where rape by "liberators" was rendered unspeakable, silence became a survival strategy that simultaneously prevented psychological integration. In contrast, in South

Korea, the later emergence of public testimony altered the symbolic environment, enabling trauma to move from bodily secrecy toward narrative articulation.

This emphasis aligns with contemporary work on institutional betrayal, which demonstrates that harm perpetrated or ignored by trusted institutions produces more severe and enduring psychological effects than interpersonal trauma alone (Smith & Freyd, 2014; Freyd & Birrell, 2013). WRSS extends this insight across generations, showing how institutional denial does not end with the survivor but reorganizes family systems and descendant psychology.

WRSS and the Prevention of Transgenerational Trauma

Importantly, WRSS is not only a descriptive model but also a preventive psychological framework. By identifying the mechanisms through which trauma is transmitted—blocked symbolization, embodied secrecy, relational silence—it also identifies points of potential interruption. Trauma transmission is not inevitable. Research consistently shows that when traumatic experiences are acknowledged, contextualized, and held within supportive relational and cultural frameworks, their transmission to subsequent generations is attenuated (Danieli, 1998; Hirsch, 2012).

Within WRSS, prevention is understood psychologically rather than behaviorally. It does not mean erasing memory or forcing disclosure. Instead, it involves creating conditions in which traumatic experience can be symbolized safely, whether through narrative, ritual, therapeutic relationship, or collective witnessing. Such symbolization enables memory to be integrated into identity, rather than being enacted through symptoms.

The contrasting trajectories of Poland and South Korea illustrate this principle vividly. In the former, prolonged silence preserved trauma in embodied and relational form, facilitating its transmission. In the latter, public testimony—though delayed—created symbolic containers that altered the psychological inheritance of trauma. Descendants did not inherit terror alone; they inherited meaning.

Between 2010 and 2025, trauma scholarship has increasingly moved toward integrative, interdisciplinary models that bridge neuroscience, psychoanalysis, attachment theory, and social context (Schore, 2019; Herman, 2022). WRSS contributes to this shift by offering a framework specifically attuned to sexual violence in war and its transgenerational aftermath. It synthesizes insights from:

- trauma neurobiology and embodiment (van der Kolk, 2014; Porges, 2011),
- attachment and relational trauma (Fonagy et al., 2018; Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 2016),
- epigenetic transmission (Yehuda et al., 2016; Vukojevic et al., 2014),
- memory and postmemory studies (Hirsch, 2012),
- and institutional betrayal theory (Smith & Freyd, 2014).

By interconnecting these domains, WRSS reframes war rape not as a historical

event with residual symptoms but as a psychological condition that unfolds across time, shaped by silence, recognition, and relational context. Its central claim is that the psychological fate of trauma is not determined solely at the moment of violence, but continuously negotiated in the generations that follow.

In this sense, WRSS provides a language for understanding how trauma persists when history cannot be spoken—and how it can be transformed when memory is finally allowed to take form.

11. Methodological Integration of Survivor Testimonies as Psychological Data

This study employs a qualitative, comparative, and psychologically grounded methodology to examine how trauma related to conflict-associated sexual violence is transmitted—or interrupted—across generations under differing historical and symbolic conditions. The methodological focus is not on diagnosing individual survivors or descendants, but on identifying pathways of trauma transmission as they emerge within embodied, relational, and socio-symbolic contexts. This approach reflects a broad consensus within contemporary trauma psychology that transgenerational trauma cannot be adequately understood through symptom-based or individualistic models alone, particularly in contexts shaped by political repression, institutional denial, or delayed recognition (Danieli, 1998; Herman, 2022; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). Instead, the study situates trauma within relational systems and historical environments that either enable or foreclose psychological integration.

The South Korean analysis is grounded in a corpus of publicly available survivor testimonies documented between 1991 and 2020 through the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance (formerly the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan), the Asian Women's Fund archives, United Nations human rights submissions, and translated court affidavits presented in domestic and international legal proceedings. This qualitative material comprises approximately survivor narratives spanning different periods of disclosure, including early testimonies characterized by fragmentation and later accounts showing greater narrative coherence following sustained public witnessing. The corpus is not treated as representative in a statistical sense, nor is it used for generalization. Rather, it is analyzed interpretively to identify recurring psychological patterns of embodiment, symbolization, and relational meaning-making as they unfold over time.

Central to this methodological approach is treating survivor testimonies as primary psychological material rather than as illustrative anecdotes or moral appeals. The exceptional availability of extensive, publicly documented testimonies from former "comfort women" offers a rare opportunity to examine how prolonged sexual enslavement under wartime conditions becomes encoded in bodily memory, relational organization, and narrative form across the lifespan. Collected and translated by survivor advocacy organizations and research bod-

ies, these testimonies document experiences of abduction, repeated rape, forced medical procedures, chronic illness, infertility, and enduring disturbances in intimacy and bodily autonomy. They are analyzed not for exhaustive factual detail, but for the internal organization of traumatic experience under conditions of extreme coercion and decades-long denial. Across narratives, survivors consistently describe disrupted temporal sequencing, sensory and somatic dominance over chronological recall, bodily metaphors for pain, and a striking absence of coherent narrative structure during periods when public acknowledgment was unavailable. These features correspond closely with established trauma research demonstrating that overwhelming sexual violence, particularly when disclosure is socially prohibited, is predominantly encoded in implicit memory systems rather than in symbolically integrated narrative form (van der Kolk, 2014; Herman, 2022).

From the perspective of War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS), these testimonies are particularly significant because they demonstrate how trauma remains embodied when speech is socially prohibited, and how the later availability of public testimony alters the psychological organization of memory. Many Korean survivors recount decades of silence following the war, during which symptoms such as chronic gynecological pain, nightmares, exaggerated startle responses, aversion to men, and persistent difficulties with attachment endured without interpretive context. These descriptions parallel clinical findings in survivors of prolonged sexual violence, where trauma is expressed through somatic distress and relational avoidance rather than narrative coherence (Ogden et al., 2006; Schore, 2019). Crucially, when survivors later began to testify publicly—often in advanced age—the structure of their narratives shifted. Later testimonies demonstrate increased symbolic framing, moral language, and explicit intergenerational concern, particularly the recurring wish that "no one else should suffer the same fate." This transformation is interpreted here as evidence of partial trauma integration through collective witnessing, consistent with psychoanalytic theories of containment and symbolization (Laub, 1995; Winnicott, 1960). Methodologically, the contrast between prolonged silence and later testimony allows for the examination of how trauma transmission pathways can be altered when recognition becomes possible.

The Polish case is grounded in original qualitative material collected through eighteen in-depth interviews with second- and third-generation descendants of Holocaust survivors who experienced sexual violence. All interviews were conducted online and focused explicitly on transgenerational family processes rather than on the reconstruction of the original events themselves. The analytic emphasis was placed on how sexual violence, when rendered unspeakable in the survivor generation, is transmitted psychologically across generations through silence, fragmented or partial narratives, affective climates, and implicit relational expectations.

Across all eighteen interviews, participants reported remarkably convergent

patterns: prolonged familial silence surrounding the survivor's wartime experiences; narratives that were incomplete, contradictory, or communicated indirectly; pervasive shame and self-blame disconnected from identifiable personal actions; and explicit or implicit expectations placed on descendants either to maintain silence or to assume responsibility for reconstructing, containing, or repairing the unspoken past. These dynamics were described not as isolated family idiosyncrasies but as persistent relational structures that shape attachment, communication, and moral responsibility within families over time. The consistency of these themes across interviews supports their interpretation as manifestations of transgenerational trauma transmission under conditions of historical and institutional silencing.

Importantly, these interviews do not function as substitutes for primary survivor testimony regarding Soviet-perpetrated sexual violence, which remains largely absent from Polish public archives due to postwar political repression under the communist regime. Rather, they provide empirical access to the psychological afterlife of that silence. The absence of survivor testimony is treated analytically, not as an evidentiary weakness, but as a constitutive feature of the trauma ecology itself. Following scholarship on organized forgetting and silenced archives, this absence is understood as evidence of institutional suppression that shaped not only historical record-keeping but also family systems and intergenerational psychic organization.

The Polish analysis is therefore based on a triangulation of: (a) these eighteen qualitative interviews with second- and third-generation descendants, (b) long-term clinical observation of similar transgenerational patterns in families affected by war-related sexual violence and enforced silence, and (c) secondary historical, sociological, and psychotraumatological literature documenting postwar censorship, memory control, and intergenerational trauma transmission in societies subjected to political denial. Together, these sources allow the study to examine how sexual violence that could not be named or symbolized in the survivor generation became encrypted and transmitted through silence, affect regulation, and relational expectation rather than through explicit narrative.

In contrast, the Polish case is defined by a profound absence of comparable survivor testimonies concerning rape committed by Red Army soldiers during and immediately after the Second World War. This absence is not interpreted as an absence of trauma, but as a historically produced void resulting from political repression, ideological censorship, and the criminalization of disclosure. Drawing on scholarship on postwar sexual violence in Eastern Europe, particularly analyses of mass rape perpetrated by Soviet troops, the study situates Polish survivors within a broader pattern of enforced silence under Soviet domination (Beevor, 2002; Grossmann, 1995). Works documenting Red Army violence demonstrate that sexual assault was widespread yet systematically erased from official memory in Soviet-aligned states. While German women's experiences have received partial historical acknowledgment, Polish women occupied a particularly untenable psy-

chological position: to speak of rape by "liberators" was framed as political betrayal and could invite social ostracism or state retaliation. Methodologically, this context explains why Polish survivor testimonies are largely absent from archives and public discourse, and why trauma transmission in this case must be reconstructed indirectly through family dynamics, somatic symptoms, and intergenerational patterns rather than direct narrative accounts.

From a psychological standpoint, the absence of testimony has profound consequences. Trauma research consistently demonstrates that when experience cannot be externalized or witnessed, it remains internally fragmented and is more likely to be transmitted implicitly to subsequent generations (Danieli, 1998; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). In the Polish case, the lack of survivor narratives prevented the emergence of shared symbolic frameworks through which descendants might contextualize inherited anxiety, hypervigilance, or somatic distress. Methodologically, this necessitates an analytic strategy that privileges embodied and relational indicators of trauma transmission over verbal memory, recognizing silence itself as a form of psychological data rather than a methodological limitation.

The study is situated within an interpretive, psychotraumatological framework that integrates psychoanalytic theory, trauma psychology, attachment research, and interdisciplinary scholarship on embodied and transgenerational memory. It holds that traumatic experience is not confined to explicit recall or verbal testimony but is often expressed through implicit, embodied, and relational forms of knowing, particularly when social or political conditions prevent disclosure (van der Kolk, 2014; Ogden et al., 2006). Epistemologically, the study rejects the positivist assumption that valid psychological data must take the form of contemporaneous documentation or standardized measures. Instead, it aligns with qualitative trauma research that treats silence, fragmentation, somatic expression, and delayed disclosure as meaningful data rather than as methodological deficits (Laub, 1995; Hirsch, 2012). This stance is especially necessary in contexts such as postwar Poland, where political repression made conventional forms of documentation structurally impossible.

The comparative design examines two historically distinct yet psychologically comparable contexts—post-Second World War Poland and post-colonial South Korea—not for cultural similarity, but for structural resonance. In both contexts, large-scale sexual violence occurred during wartime, followed by prolonged periods in which survivors were denied recognition, legitimacy, and symbolic space to articulate their experiences. The cases diverge, however, in the later availability of public witnessing and collective acknowledgment, making them particularly suited for examining how differing postwar conditions shape psychological transmission across generations. Comparison is not used to rank suffering or generalize culturally specific outcomes, but to identify psychological mechanisms that operate across contexts while remaining sensitive to historical specificity (Danieli, 1998; Assmann, 2011).

Within this framework, silence, embodiment, and relational patterns are treated as legitimate forms of psychological data. Trauma research demonstrates that when traumatic experience cannot be safely articulated, it is more likely to be encoded in implicit memory systems, manifesting through bodily symptoms, affective states, and patterns of interpersonal behavior (van der Kolk, 2014). These manifestations are not secondary to narrative memory but primary expressions of unintegrated trauma. Silence is therefore interpreted not as the absence of experience, but as an adaptive response to environments in which disclosure is dangerous or invalidated. Psychologically, however, such silence prevents symbolization and mourning, increasing the likelihood that trauma will be transmitted implicitly across generations (Herman, 1992; Danieli, 1998). Attachment research further demonstrates that caregivers' unresolved trauma shapes children's stress regulation and internal working models even in the absence of explicit communication, making family atmospheres of vigilance, emotional constriction, or avoidance powerful conduits of psychological inheritance (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 2016).

War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) is employed in this study as an interpretive framework rather than a diagnostic tool. The analysis traces how trauma moves from survivor to descendant through affective, somatic, and relational pathways, and how these pathways are shaped or altered by historical conditions of silence or witnessing. In the Polish case, WRSS illuminates how enforced silence and institutional denial result in encrypted trauma—trauma that remains active yet unarticulated, carried forward through bodily regulation and family dynamics. In the South Korean case, WRSS enables analysis of how the later emergence of public testimony and ritualized witnessing facilitated partial symbolization, shifting transmission from implicit embodiment toward narrative and shared meaning. This analytic strategy is informed by psychoanalytic theories of symbolization and containment, which emphasize that trauma that cannot be symbolized is more likely to be enacted or transmitted rather than remembered, whereas the availability of symbolic containers enables integration and reduces unconscious transmission (Laub, 1995; Winnicott, 1960; Assmann, 2011).

Ethical considerations are central to this methodological approach. Research on conflict-related sexual violence and transgenerational trauma carries significant risks, including retraumatization, exploitation of survivor narratives, and reproduction of silencing dynamics. These risks are addressed by grounding analysis in already documented material, avoiding sensationalized description, and focusing on transmission mechanisms rather than individual pathology. The study also reflects reflexive awareness of the researcher's interpretive role, recognizing that trauma research is inherently relational and that interpretation can either replicate denial or contribute to symbolic acknowledgment.

Finally, this methodology conceptualizes prevention in psychological terms, as the interruption of trauma transmission across generations. Prevention is exam-

ined retrospectively by identifying where and how transmission pathways were altered. In this sense, the South Korean case provides insight into the psychological conditions under which trauma can be symbolized and its transmission attenuated. In contrast, the Polish case illustrates the long-term consequences of blocked symbolization. This retrospective, psychologically grounded approach aligns with contemporary trauma research emphasizing that prevention of transgenerational trauma depends not only on early intervention, but on the social and symbolic environments that shape memory, meaning, and relational safety (Herman, 2022; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018).

12. Case Analysis I: Poland through WRSS—Encrypted Trauma and Transgenerational Transmission

Applying the War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) framework to the Polish case reveals how postwar political silence reorganized sexual violence trauma into an enduring psychological condition that extended beyond individual survivors and became embedded within family systems and subsequent generations. In Poland, sexual violence committed by Red Army soldiers during and immediately after the Second World War occurred within a historical context that rendered disclosure impossible and recognition forbidden. This prohibition did not merely delay healing; it fundamentally altered the psychological form trauma assumed, transforming it into what WRSS conceptualizes as encrypted trauma—trauma that remains active yet unsymbolized, carried forward through embodiment, relational patterns, and inherited affect rather than narrative memory.

From a WRSS perspective, the defining feature of the Polish case is not the absence of suffering but the absence of symbolic mediation. Trauma theory consistently demonstrates that overwhelming experiences require relational witnessing and symbolic framing in order to be integrated into autobiographical memory (Herman, 1992; Laub, 1995). In postwar Poland, these conditions were structurally unavailable. Sexual violence by "liberators" could not be named without threatening the ideological foundations of the state, and survivors were forced into silence as a condition of social survival. Psychologically, this produced a situation in which traumatic experience could not be mentalized or contextualized and therefore remained lodged in implicit memory systems.

Within WRSS, this blockage of symbolization is understood as the primary mechanism through which trauma becomes transgenerational. When trauma cannot be spoken, it does not disappear; it is displaced into the body and into relational dynamics. Clinical and empirical research shows that unintegrated trauma is expressed through autonomic dysregulation, chronic somatic symptoms, exaggerated startle responses, and rigid patterns of affect control (van der Kolk, 2014; Schore, 2019). In the Polish case, such bodily adaptations were not transient postwar reactions but long-term survival strategies shaped by a political environment that required silence.

These embodied adaptations were then transmitted within family systems. Attachment research has demonstrated that caregivers' unresolved trauma shapes children's stress regulation, emotional attunement, and implicit expectations of danger, even when the traumatic event itself is never discussed (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 2016). WRSS extends this insight by situating these attachment dynamics within a broader historical field of enforced silence. In Polish families affected by wartime sexual violence, silence itself became a relational language. Children learned not through stories but through atmosphere—through vigilance, emotional constriction, avoidance of bodily topics, and heightened sensitivity to threat.

Psychologically, this mode of transmission differs fundamentally from narrative inheritance. Descendants did not inherit memory in the form of stories or contextual knowledge; they inherited states. Anxiety, mistrust, somatic distress, and an enduring sense of danger appeared without identifiable cause. Research on transgenerational trauma has repeatedly documented this phenomenon, particularly among descendants of survivors whose trauma remained unacknowledged or socially denied (Danieli, 1998; Kellermann, 2001). WRSS conceptualizes this as the transmission of unprocessed affect rather than remembered experience.

The political context of postwar Poland intensified this process. Institutional denial functioned as a form of secondary trauma, reinforcing the original violation by invalidating survivors' reality (Herman, 2022). When institutions that are expected to protect—such as the state, the legal system, or the medical profession—participate in denial, survivors are left without external anchors for meaning. This dynamic aligns with research on institutional betrayal, which demonstrates that trauma perpetrated or ignored by trusted systems produces more profound and more enduring psychological harm than interpersonal violence alone (Smith & Freyd, 2014). In the Polish case, institutional betrayal did not end with the survivor generation; it structured the psychological inheritance of their descendants.

WRSS emphasizes that encrypted trauma is maintained through repetition rather than recollection. Without symbolic integration, trauma is not remembered as past but lived as present. This temporal collapse is evident in clinical descriptions of descendants who experience chronic hypervigilance, disproportionate fear responses, or somatic symptoms that appear disconnected from current circumstances. Such patterns reflect what trauma researchers describe as implicit memory activation, in which the body reacts as if the threat were ongoing (van der Kolk, 2014). In WRSS terms, the past remains physiologically active because it was never symbolically contained.

Importantly, the Polish case also demonstrates how silence can be misinterpreted as resilience. Survivors married, worked, raised children, and participated in social life, often being perceived as having "moved on". WRSS challenges this interpretation by distinguishing between functional adaptation and psychological

integration. Adaptation under coercive conditions may ensure survival, but it does not resolve trauma. Instead, it often displaces trauma into less visible forms—chronic illness, emotional numbing, relational rigidity—that are then normalized within families and communities.

From a transgenerational perspective, this normalization is particularly consequential. When silence becomes habitual, descendants may interpret inherited anxiety or mistrust as personal traits rather than as legacies of historical violence. This internalization increases the risk of self-blame and further obscures the origin of distress. WRSS identifies this process as a key mechanism through which trauma persists across generations without recognition. The absence of narrative not only prevents mourning; it prevents attribution, leaving descendants without a framework for understanding their own psychological states.

The Polish case also illustrates the cumulative nature of encrypted trauma. Because the original violence was never publicly acknowledged, later experiences of threat or instability—whether political, economic, or interpersonal—were more likely to reactivate unprocessed trauma. Trauma research has shown that subsequent stressors can intensify earlier unresolved trauma by reactivating the same physiological and affective pathways (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). In WRSS terms, encrypted trauma increases vulnerability to retraumatization, not because individuals are weak, but because the trauma system was never deactivated.

Crucially, WRSS does not interpret this outcome as inevitable. The persistence of transgenerational trauma in Poland is understood as the result of specific historical and psychological conditions, not as an intrinsic property of Polish culture or identity. This distinction is essential. Trauma transmission occurs not because survivors are incapable of processing experience, but because the conditions required for processing—recognition, witnessing, and symbolic space—were systematically denied.

The absence of survivor testimony in the Polish case thus becomes analytically significant. Unlike the South Korean case, where later public testimony altered the psychological trajectory of trauma, Polish survivors were denied opportunities for collective witnessing. Without such symbolic containers, trauma remained privatized and embodied. WRSS conceptualizes this absence not as silence alone, but as forced muteness, a condition in which speech is not merely discouraged but rendered dangerous.

In summary, the Polish case demonstrates how war-related sexual violence, when followed by institutional denial and enforced silence, becomes reorganized into an encrypted psychological condition transmitted across generations. WRSS allows this process to be analyzed without reducing it to individual pathology or cultural deficiency. By tracing how trauma moved from survivor to descendant through embodiment, attachment, and relational silence, the framework reveals the psychological costs of postwar non-recognition. Trauma persisted not because it was remembered too vividly, but because it could not be

remembered at all.

13. Case Analysis II: South Korea Through WRSS—From Encrypted Trauma to Collective Symbolization

Applying the War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) framework to the South Korean case reveals a historically contingent psychological transformation in which prolonged, embodied trauma was partially reorganized through public testimony, collective witnessing, and sustained—though unstable—social recognition. This trajectory cannot be understood as a linear movement from silence to healing, nor as a culturally specific phenomenon rooted in resilience or moral exceptionalism. Rather, WRSS conceptualizes the South Korean case as a rare instance in which the form of trauma transmission changed over time, shifting from encrypted, bodily inheritance toward partial symbolization, with profound implications for gendered subjectivity, collective memory, and transgenerational psychological risk.

During Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945), the Japanese military established a system of sexual enslavement known euphemistically as the "comfort station" system. Tens of thousands of women and girls—predominantly Korean, but also Chinese, Filipino, and others—were abducted, deceived, or coerced into sexual slavery, where they were subjected to repeated rape, physical violence, forced gynecological examinations, disease, starvation, and confinement (Soh, 2008). This violence was not incidental but bureaucratically organized, racialized, and militarized. From a trauma psychology perspective, such conditions constitute the most severe form of complex trauma: chronic sexual violation under captivity, accompanied by total loss of agency and relational safety (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2014).

WRSS conceptualizes this form of violence as exceptionally prone to transgenerational transmission when followed by social erasure. Trauma research demonstrates that prolonged sexual violence disrupts not only memory but the fundamental organization of the self, including bodily boundaries, affect regulation, and the capacity for trust (Schore, 2019). When such trauma is followed by decades of silence and shame, its psychological effects do not resolve with time; they reorganize into enduring patterns of embodiment and relationship.

Following liberation in 1945, South Korean survivors entered a postwar environment that structurally enforced silence. The newly established South Korean state, shaped by Cold War geopolitics, authoritarian governance, and accelerated modernization, did not recognize survivors of military sexual slavery as victims of war crimes. The 1965 normalization treaty with Japan effectively erased individual claims by framing colonial injustices as diplomatically resolved (Lind, 2008). At the same time, Confucian patriarchal norms constructed female sexual purity as a moral asset belonging to family and nation, rendering survivors socially unspeakable (Soh, 2008).

Psychologically, this produced what WRSS defines as encrypted trauma. Survi-

vors carried their experiences privately for decades without language, witnesses, or symbolic frames. Testimonies later given by survivors consistently describe lives shaped by chronic pain, gynecological illness, infertility, insomnia, nightmares, exaggerated startle responses, dissociation, aversion to men, and profound difficulties with intimacy and trust. These symptoms were often interpreted by survivors themselves as fate, punishment, or personal defect rather than as consequences of systemic sexual violence (Soh, 2008). Such interpretations reflect the internalization of social shame, a process trauma theorists identify as particularly damaging because it binds trauma to identity rather than to the event (Herman, 2022).

Within WRSS, this silence is not understood as passive forgetting but as an adaptive strategy in response to social prohibition. Survivors learned that disclosure would not bring protection or justice, but further humiliation or exclusion. Trauma, therefore, remained encoded in implicit memory systems, expressed through bodily states, somatic symptoms, and affective patterns rather than narrative recall (van der Kolk, 2014). During this period, the risk of transgenerational transmission was high. Descendants were raised by caregivers whose nervous systems remained organized around vigilance, control, and suppressed terror, even in the absence of spoken history.

The psychological trajectory of the South Korean case underwent a decisive shift in 1991, when Kim Hak-sun publicly testified about her experiences. This moment cannot be overstated in psychological terms. Kim Hak-sun's testimony was not merely the first disclosure; it was the first socially received articulation of trauma that had previously existed only in embodied secrecy. Delivered initially through a press conference and later in legal proceedings, her testimony directly confronted decades of institutional denial by both the Japanese and South Korean governments (Soh, 2008).

From a WRSS perspective, Kim Hak-sun's testimony marked the emergence of an external witness, a prerequisite for trauma to move from embodied containment toward symbolic articulation (Laub, 1995). Trauma theory emphasizes that testimony requires not only speech but reception. Prior to 1991, survivors may have spoken privately, but there was no established listening community. Kim Hak-sun's testimony created that body.

Psychologically, her act reconfigured gendered shame. In a society where sexual violation had been equated with moral contamination, Kim Hak-sun publicly relocated shame from survivor to perpetrator. This relocation is central to trauma integration, as it restores moral agency and disrupts internalized blame (Herman, 2022). WRSS interprets this shift as a turning point not only for survivors but for the symbolic field in which trauma existed.

Kim Hak-sun's testimony catalyzed a wave of disclosures by other elderly survivors, many in their seventies and eighties. These testimonies reveal a striking psychological pattern. Early narratives were fragmented, dominated by sensory detail, bodily pain, and abrupt temporal shifts—hallmarks of trauma encoded

without prior symbolization (van der Kolk, 2014). Survivors often struggled to locate themselves in time, oscillating between childhood, captivity, and old age within a single narrative moment. WRSS interprets this fragmentation not as cognitive failure but as evidence of trauma that had remained stored in implicit memory systems for decades.

Over time, however, as testimonies were repeated and socially received, narrative structure began to change. Survivors increasingly framed their experiences within moral, historical, and intergenerational narratives. They articulated demands for apology, justice, and remembrance, often emphasizing that their testimony was offered not for personal relief but to prevent repetition. This narrative evolution reflects what psychoanalytic trauma theory describes as the gradual transformation of unmetallized experience into symbolized memory through relational containment (Laub, 1995; Winnicott, 1960).

The establishment of the Wednesday Demonstrations in 1992 marked a further psychological and symbolic transformation. Held weekly in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul—a practice that continues uninterrupted—the demonstrations created a ritualized public space for testimony, protest, and remembrance. WRSS conceptualizes these gatherings as collective holding environments, providing predictability, repetition, and public acknowledgment. Trauma research distinguishes between traumatic repetition, which overwhelms, and symbolic repetition, which integrates; the latter requires stable relational frames (Laub, 1995).

The location of the demonstrations was psychologically decisive. By situating the protest directly outside the Japanese Embassy, responsibility was externalized. Trauma was no longer housed solely in survivors' bodies; it was placed within a historical relationship between states. This externalization is essential for trauma integration, as it interrupts self-blame and restores agency (Herman, 2022). Survivors became moral witnesses addressing a responsible actor, rather than isolated bearers of shame.

Over the decades, the Wednesday Demonstrations evolved into intergenerational events. Students, activists, descendants, and international observers joined elderly survivors, transforming private trauma into collective memory. WRSS interprets this intergenerational participation as a key mechanism for altering trauma transmission. Descendants inherited not silence but narrative, symbol, and ethical orientation. Research on postmemory suggests that such mediated inheritance, while emotionally demanding, reduces the likelihood of unconscious reenactment compared to encrypted trauma (Hirsch, 2012).

Institutional responses shaped this psychological field in complex ways. The Japanese government issued several statements acknowledging responsibility, including the Kōno Statement (1993) and the Murayama Statement (1995), expressing remorse for colonial violence. However, these acknowledgments were repeatedly undermined by later political reversals, denialist rhetoric, and refusals to provide legally binding reparations (Soh, 2008; Kim, 2016). From a WRSS perspective, this inconsistency produced symbolic instability. Trauma integration re-

quires reliable recognition; fluctuating acknowledgment reactivates injury rather than resolving it.

At the same time, South Korean civil society developed extensive support systems for elderly survivors, including medical care, housing, and psychosocial services coordinated by organizations such as the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance. These supports played a crucial psychological role. Trauma research emphasizes that late-life testimony is ambivalent: it can be reparative, but it also risks retraumatization if not accompanied by care (Herman, 1992). In the South Korean case, sustained community support mitigated these risks, enabling repeated testimony without total psychological collapse.

WRSS emphasizes that the transformation observed in South Korea constitutes partial symbolization, not clinical healing. Many survivors continued to experience physical illness, grief, anger, and distrust until death. What changed was not the presence of pain, but its organization. Trauma shifted from an internal, bodily burden to a shared moral memory. Survivors repeatedly stated that they spoke "for history" and "for future generations," indicating a movement from inwardly contained suffering to outwardly directed ethical agency.

The implications for transgenerational transmission are profound. Descendants inherited not only pain but context. Anxiety, sorrow, and anger could be linked to historical injustice rather than experienced as personal pathology. WRSS conceptualizes this as a reduction—though not elimination—of transmission risk: trauma remains, but it is held in language, ritual, and relationship rather than enacted solely through the body (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018).

Compared with Poland, the contrast is decisive. Both contexts involved mass sexual violence followed by prolonged silence. What differentiates South Korea is not cultural resilience or individual strength, but the later emergence of symbolic containers capable of holding traumatic memory. Where Poland remained trapped in enforced muteness, South Korea developed a fragile yet enduring infrastructure of witnessing. WRSS allows these divergent outcomes to be understood as variations of the same psychological process shaped by historical conditions.

In sum, the South Korean case demonstrates that the psychological fate of war-related sexual violence is not fixed at the moment of trauma. Through public testimony, ritualized protest, partial institutional recognition, and sustained community support, survivors altered the conditions under which trauma was carried forward. WRSS does not frame this as recovery or closure, but as a reorganization of memory that changed how trauma lived across generations. Trauma remained part of the collective history, but it ceased to function solely as a silent, embodied force that governed the future.

14. Comparative Psychological Analysis: Silence, Symbolization, and the Prevention of Transgenerational Trauma

The Polish and South Korean cases, when examined side by side through the

framework of War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS), reveal that the decisive variable shaping the transgenerational fate of war-related sexual violence is not the severity of the original trauma, nor the cultural characteristics of the affected societies, but the postwar conditions under which traumatic experience is either silenced or symbolically mediated. Both contexts involved mass sexual violence against women during wartime, followed by extended periods of denial and social suppression. Yet their long-term psychological trajectories diverged in ways that illuminate how trauma is either transmitted as an unprocessed inheritance or partially reorganized through collective symbolization.

WRSS provides a framework for understanding this divergence by shifting the analytic focus from trauma as an event to trauma as a process of transmission. Within this framework, trauma is not resolved—or perpetuated—solely within individual psyches, but is shaped by the availability of relational, social, and symbolic structures capable of containing overwhelming experience. Where such structures are absent, trauma remains encrypted; where they emerge, even belatedly, the form of trauma transmission can be altered.

In postwar Poland, sexual violence committed by Soviet soldiers occurred within a political context that rendered acknowledgment impossible. The violence was followed not by social recognition but by ideological erasure. As a result, survivors were denied the basic psychological conditions required for trauma integration: external validation, narrative framing, and communal mourning (Herman, 1992; Laub, 1995). WRSS conceptualizes this condition as structurally enforced encryption, in which trauma remains active yet unsymbolized, encoded primarily through bodily states, autonomic regulation, and relational patterns rather than narrative memory.

The psychological consequences of this encryption are evident in the mode of transgenerational transmission observed in the Polish case. Descendants did not inherit articulated memories or historical explanations; they inherited affective states—hypervigilance, mistrust, somatic distress, and a pervasive sense of danger—without identifiable origin. Research on transgenerational trauma has consistently shown that when trauma is not symbolized, it is transmitted implicitly through attachment dynamics and stress physiology rather than consciously remembered narratives (Danieli, 1998; Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 2016; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). WRSS situates these findings within a political context, emphasizing that such transmission is not the result of familial dysfunction but of systematic denial.

By contrast, the South Korean case demonstrates how the later emergence of symbolic containers—however incomplete—can modify the psychological trajectory of trauma transmission. For decades, Korean survivors of military sexual slavery experienced conditions similar to those in Poland: silence, shame, and institutional abandonment. Trauma remained encrypted within bodies and relationships, producing chronic somatic symptoms, relational withdrawal, and intergenerational vulnerability. What changed was not the past itself, but the condi-

tions of remembering.

The public testimony of Kim Hak-sun in 1991, followed by the sustained practice of the Wednesday Demonstrations, created an external witnessing structure capable of receiving and bearing witness to traumatic experiences. From a WRSS perspective, this development did not "heal" trauma but enabled partial symbolization—the transformation of embodied, implicit memory into shared narrative and moral meaning (Laub, 1995; Winnicott, 1960). Trauma became locatable in history rather than omnipresent in the body.

This distinction between encryption and symbolization is central to understanding prevention in psychological terms. WRSS does not define prevention as the absence of trauma, nor as resilience in the face of violence. Rather, prevention refers to the interruption of unconscious transmission—the process by which unprocessed trauma is passed from one generation to the next without context or meaning. When trauma remains encrypted, descendants are more likely to experience anxiety, somatic distress, or relational difficulties as personal pathology rather than as inherited responses to historical violence. When trauma is symbolized, even partially, descendants inherit not only pain but explanation.

The contrast between Poland and South Korea thus illustrates two distinct modes of inheritance. In Poland, silence functioned as a mechanism of transmission. The absence of testimony did not protect future generations; it ensured that trauma remained active within family systems and bodies. In South Korea, testimony and ritualized witnessing altered this mechanism. While trauma persisted, it was carried forward through narrative, activism, and ethical commitment rather than through silent embodiment alone. Research on postmemory supports this distinction, suggesting that mediated, contextualized inheritance is psychologically less destabilizing than encrypted transmission (Hirsch, 2012).

Importantly, WRSS cautions against interpreting the South Korean case as a model of closure or reconciliation. Institutional acknowledgment remained inconsistent, apologies were repeatedly undermined, and survivors continued to suffer until death. From a trauma psychology perspective, this instability limited the depth of integration that could be achieved. Reliable recognition is a prerequisite for full symbolization; fluctuating acknowledgment risks retraumatization by reactivating uncertainty and betrayal (Herman, 2022). Nevertheless, the presence of sustained public witnessing altered the psychological field enough to change the form of transgenerational transmission.

Gender plays a critical role in this comparative analysis. In both contexts, patriarchal norms framed sexual violence as a source of shame, intensifying silence and self-blame. WRSS highlights that trauma transmission is inseparable from gendered moral frameworks. In South Korea, public testimony challenged these frameworks by relocating shame from the survivor to the perpetrator and the state. This relocation was psychologically transformative, not only for survivors but for collective understandings of gender, violation, and moral responsibility

(Soh, 2008). In Poland, by contrast, the absence of such a symbolic challenge preserved gendered silence, reinforcing the internalization of shame across generations.

From a clinical perspective, the comparison underscores that trauma prevention cannot be reduced to early intervention or individual therapy alone. While such interventions are essential, they are insufficient in contexts where trauma is politically denied. WRSS reframes prevention as a relational and symbolic process that depends on collective acknowledgment, historical truth-telling, and the creation of social containers capable of holding traumatic memory. Without these conditions, individual therapeutic efforts risk being overwhelmed by the persistence of encrypted trauma at the familial and societal level.

The comparative analysis also clarifies why time alone is insufficient to heal trauma. Both Poland and South Korea experienced decades of silence. In neither case did trauma diminish spontaneously. What mattered was not temporal distance from the original violence, but the availability of symbolic mediation. This finding aligns with trauma research demonstrating that unprocessed trauma remains biologically and psychologically active regardless of elapsed time (van der Kolk, 2014; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018).

WRSS thus contributes a crucial theoretical insight: transgenerational trauma is preventable not by erasing the past, but by transforming how it is held. Silence does not protect future generations; it burdens them with uncontextualized fear. Testimony, ritual, and collective witnessing do not eliminate suffering. However, they redistribute it across social and symbolic space, reducing the likelihood that it will be enacted unconsciously through bodies and relationships.

In synthesizing the Polish and South Korean cases, WRSS demonstrates that the psychological aftermath of war rape is not determined solely by violence itself, but by the moral, political, and relational environments that follow. Where silence is enforced, trauma becomes encrypted and transmissible. Where symbolization becomes possible, even late and imperfectly, trauma can be contextualized, its transmission altered, and its destructive repetition mitigated.

This comparative analysis reinforces the central claim of the article: that preventing the recurrence of trauma-related violence requires attention not only to future conflicts, but to the unresolved psychological legacies of past ones. Trauma prevention, from a WRSS perspective, is inseparable from historical truth, collective responsibility, and the ethical labor of witnessing.

15. Implications for Transgenerational Trauma Prevention, Clinical Practice, and Memory Politics

The comparative analysis of postwar Poland and South Korea demonstrates that the most enduring psychological consequences of war-related sexual violence are not determined solely by the violence itself, but by the conditions under which that violence is remembered, silenced, or symbolically mediated. War

Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) offers a framework for understanding these consequences not as static outcomes, but as dynamic processes of transmission that unfold across generations. The implications of this framework extend beyond historical analysis, shaping how prevention, clinical work, and collective memory must be conceptualized in societies emerging from mass sexual violence.

One of the central implications of WRSS is a reconceptualization of prevention. Traditional approaches to trauma prevention often focus on early intervention, resilience-building, or the reduction of exposure to future violence. While these approaches are necessary, they are insufficient in contexts where trauma has already occurred and remains socially unacknowledged. WRSS reframes prevention as the interruption of transgenerational trauma transmission, rather than the elimination of trauma itself.

The Polish and South Korean cases demonstrate that trauma does not dissipate with time. Decades of silence did not reduce psychological suffering; instead, they allowed trauma to reorganize into embodied, relational, and affective patterns that were transmitted implicitly to subsequent generations. From a WRSS perspective, prevention begins when trauma is prevented from remaining encrypted. This requires not forgetting, but symbolization—placing traumatic experience within a shared narrative and moral framework that allows it to be contextualized rather than reenacted.

Importantly, WRSS challenges the assumption that prevention is forward-looking only. Prevention is also retrospective. The failure to address historical trauma creates conditions in which future generations carry unresolved fear, mistrust, and bodily vigilance that can shape social relations, political attitudes, and intergroup conflict. In this sense, unresolved war rape is not only a legacy of past violence but a latent risk factor for future instability.

Clinical Implications: Working with Encrypted and Symbolized Trauma

The WRSS framework has significant implications for clinical practice, particularly in work with survivors of conflict-related sexual violence and their descendants. Clinicians frequently encounter patients whose symptoms—chronic anxiety, somatic distress, relational difficulties—do not correspond neatly to identifiable life events. WRSS provides a conceptual tool for understanding such presentations as expressions of inherited trauma, rather than as individual pathology.

In cases of encrypted trauma, such as those observed in postwar Poland, clinical work must proceed with caution. Descendants may present with intense affect or bodily symptoms without narrative content. Attempts to force verbalization or insight prematurely risk retraumatization, as the trauma has never been symbolically contained at a social level. WRSS suggests that clinicians working in such contexts must attend not only to individual histories, but to the historical silences

that shape what can be spoken at all.

By contrast, in contexts where partial symbolization has occurred, as in South Korea, clinical work may engage more directly with narrative inheritance. Descendants may struggle not with the absence of meaning, but with the emotional weight of inherited stories. Here, the task is not to uncover hidden trauma, but to help patients integrate inherited memory without assuming responsibility for historical violence. WRSS underscores the importance of distinguishing between bearing witness and carrying guilt, a distinction that is often blurred in transgenerational trauma.

Across both contexts, WRSS emphasizes that trauma-informed clinical practice cannot remain politically neutral. When trauma is produced or maintained by institutional denial, clinicians must recognize that symptoms are not merely intrapsychic but socially generated. Ethical practice, therefore, includes acknowledging the limits of individual therapy in the absence of broader symbolic recognition.

A further implication of this study concerns the psychological role of gendered shame in trauma transmission. In both Poland and South Korea, patriarchal norms framed sexual violence as a source of female dishonor rather than as a crime committed against women. WRSS highlights that such moral frameworks intensify trauma by binding it to identity rather than to historical injustice.

The South Korean case demonstrates that public testimony can disrupt this dynamic by relocating shame from the survivor to the perpetrator and the state. This relocation is not merely a political move; it is psychologically transformative. When shame is externalized, survivors and descendants can reorganize their relationship to the past without internalizing moral contamination. In Poland, the absence of such symbolic relocation preserved gendered silence, allowing shame to be transmitted implicitly across generations.

For trauma prevention, this finding underscores the necessity of addressing gender norms as psychological structures, not merely cultural attitudes. Without challenging frameworks that equate sexual violation with moral failure, trauma remains bound to identity and is more likely to be transmitted.

WRSS also reframes memory politics as a psychological issue rather than a purely historical or ideological one. Decisions about what is remembered, commemorated, or denied shape not only public narratives but private nervous systems. The Polish and South Korean cases illustrate that institutional silence functions as a form of secondary trauma, reinforcing the original violation by invalidating survivors' reality.

From a psychological perspective, reliable acknowledgment is essential for trauma integration. Inconsistent or symbolic recognition—such as apologies without reparations, or acknowledgments followed by denial—creates conditions of instability that can reactivate trauma rather than resolve it. WRSS emphasizes that recognition must be durable and trustworthy to support psychological inte-

gration.

This insight has implications for how societies approach apologies, memorials, and truth commissions. Such mechanisms are not merely symbolic gestures; they function as collective containers for traumatic memory. When designed without psychological insight, they risk retraumatization. When grounded in sustained witnessing, they can alter the form of trauma transmission across generations.

16. Ethical Limits and the Refusal of Closure: Research Imperatives and Institutional Responsibility

War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) insists on an ethical refusal of closure not as a philosophical stance alone, but as a methodological and clinical necessity. Neither the Polish nor the South Korean case supports narratives of healing, recovery, or reconciliation as endpoints of trauma related to war rape. Such narratives risk reproducing the very mechanisms of denial that initially rendered survivors invisible. Trauma associated with conflict-related sexual violence does not disappear through acknowledgment alone, nor does it resolve within the lifespan of direct survivors. Instead, it reorganizes itself across generations, institutions, and social systems, demanding sustained scholarly, clinical, and ethical engagement rather than symbolic finality.

From a WRSS perspective, closure is not merely unattainable; it is psychologically misleading. Research on complex and transgenerational trauma demonstrates that unresolved traumatic experience is carried forward not as static memory, but as evolving patterns of affect regulation, embodiment, and relational expectation (Danieli, 1998; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). These patterns shift across generations in response to changing political climates, social narratives, and institutional responses. To declare closure prematurely forecloses inquiry into how trauma continues to operate long after public acknowledgment or legal recognition has occurred.

The refusal of closure, therefore, entails a research imperative: the systematic study of how second and third generations bear the psychological consequences of war rape under varying historical and political conditions. Empirical studies of descendants of trauma survivors consistently demonstrate elevated rates of anxiety, somatic symptoms, attachment insecurity, and stress reactivity, even in the absence of direct exposure (Kellermann, 2001; Yehuda et al., 2016). WRSS extends this literature by emphasizing that these outcomes cannot be fully understood without examining the social environments in which trauma is transmitted. Families do not transmit trauma in isolation; they do so within broader systems of silence, recognition, or denial.

In both Poland and South Korea, the experiences of descendants are shaped by the political treatment of survivors. In contexts where trauma remains publicly denied or ambiguously acknowledged, descendants are more likely to inherit uncontextualized distress—anxiety without narrative, vigilance without explanation.

By contrast, where testimony and public witnessing have occurred, descendants may inherit sorrow and anger, but also meaning and moral orientation (Hirsch, 2012). These differences underscore the necessity of longitudinal, interdisciplinary research that follows families across generations while accounting for shifts in the political climate and public discourse.

Such research must also examine how systems respond to survivors and their descendants over time. Legal, medical, and psychological institutions play a critical role in shaping the psychological fate of trauma. Yet, these systems are often ill-equipped to address the complexity of war rape and its long-term consequences. Legal frameworks frequently prioritize evidentiary standards that are incompatible with the fragmented nature of traumatic memory, particularly when disclosure is delayed by decades (Herman, 2022). Medical systems tend to treat survivors' symptoms—chronic pain, gynecological illness, stress-related disorders—as isolated conditions rather than as manifestations of embodied trauma. Psychological services, meanwhile, often rely on diagnostic categories that individualize suffering and obscure its historical and political origins (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010).

WRSS calls for a critical examination of how these institutional instruments are implemented and adapted in post-conflict contexts. Trauma-informed practice cannot be static; it must evolve as understanding of complex and transgenerational trauma deepens. Research has shown that conventional PTSD models are insufficient for capturing the relational, embodied, and intergenerational dimensions of trauma associated with prolonged sexual violence (Cloitre et al., 2018). Without theoretical and methodological adaptation, institutions risk retraumatizing survivors by forcing their experiences into inadequate frameworks.

The ethical refusal of closure also demands attention to institutional betrayal. When states, courts, or professional systems fail to recognize or adequately respond to survivors' experiences, they reproduce harm by invalidating reality and eroding trust (Smith & Freyd, 2014). WRSS situates institutional betrayal as a key factor in trauma transmission. Survivors' children and grandchildren do not inherit trauma solely from family dynamics; they inherit it from the persistent failure of systems to name and address historical violence. Research on this dynamic remains limited and urgently needed.

Moreover, WRSS emphasizes the importance of examining how political climates influence psychological outcomes. Shifts toward denial, nationalism, or historical revisionism can reactivate trauma even decades after initial acknowledgment. Conversely, periods of openness and truth-telling can alter how trauma is held and transmitted. Longitudinal research that integrates political analysis with psychological assessment is therefore essential for understanding trauma as a living process rather than a concluded event (Assmann, 2011; Herman, 2022).

Ethically, refusing closure also means resisting the temptation to instrumental-

ize survivors' suffering for narratives of national redemption or reconciliation. Trauma research cautions that demands for forgiveness or reconciliation, when imposed prematurely or institutionally, can function as secondary violations by prioritizing social cohesion over psychological truth (Herman, 1992). WRSS insists that ethical engagement with war rape requires sustained responsibility rather than symbolic resolution. Remembrance must be ongoing but also psychologically contained, ensuring that memory does not overwhelm individuals or communities.

From a preventive standpoint, this ethic has profound implications. By maintaining trauma within collective awareness rather than relegating it to the past, societies reduce the likelihood of repetition. Silence enables denial; denial enables recurrence. Acknowledgment, when consistent and accompanied by institutional adaptation, creates accountability. Prevention, from a WRSS perspective, is not achieved through forgetting or closure, but through the continuous refinement of understanding—scientific, clinical, and ethical—of how trauma operates across time.

In conclusion, WRSS's refusal of closure is not a rejection of healing but a commitment to epistemic humility and ethical vigilance. It recognizes that trauma related to war rape exceeds individual lifespans and disciplinary boundaries. Addressing it requires ongoing research into transgenerational processes, critical evaluation of institutional practices, and sustained attention to the political conditions that shape memory and silence. Only through such continued engagement can societies hope to interrupt the transmission of trauma without denying the realities of the past.

17. Concluding Reflections

This article has argued that War Rape Survivors Syndrome offers a necessary framework for understanding the transgenerational psychological consequences of conflict-related sexual violence. Through a comparative analysis of Poland and South Korea, it has been demonstrated that the fate of trauma is shaped less by the violence itself than by the conditions that follow it. Where silence is enforced, trauma becomes encrypted and transmissible. Where symbolization becomes possible, even imperfectly and belatedly, trauma can be contextualized and its transmission altered.

The implications of this finding extend beyond the cases examined in this study. In a world where sexual violence continues to be used as a weapon of war, the psychological costs of silence are not confined to the past. WRSS calls for a trauma-informed ethics of memory, one that recognizes that how societies remember violence shapes not only historical narratives, but the psychological futures of generations yet to come.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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