

Public Representation of Wartime Sexual Violence in Kosova

“Memoriali Heroinat” (The Heroines Memorial) as a case study

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Abstract

This paper elaborates on the historical trajectory of victims of wartime sexual violence in Kosova, tracing the transition from total silence after the war to the battle for legal recognition, up to public representation. The adoption of the legal framework in 2013, which recognizes the status of victims of sexual violence during the 1998-99 war in Kosova, served as a starting point for the public debate on this issue. However, public representation remains linked to national narratives, commemoration, and collective national memory. Furthermore, this essay examines how conventional commemoration has positioned the victims as subjects without agency, uniting all the heterogeneity of their experiences into a single memorial. Analyzing the rhetoric used in the "The Heroines Memorial" that names victims of wartime sexual violence as heroes who contributed and sacrificed to the liberation of Kosova, this essay questions whether such representation within nationalist discourse is sufficient to open a stigma-free public conversation about wartime sexual violence in Kosova.

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Introduction

For a long time, memory studies have been confined to psychology because its components were thought to be individual and personal. So, ignoring the fact that memory also has its social and collective components. How we remember the past, what we memorize, and what we use it for is very important for the group, the nation, and for future generations.

Because of the many violent events that occurred during the 20th century, what historian Eric Hobsbawm calls the "age of extremes," (Hobsbawm, 1994) there was an increase in studies of the field of collective memory that examined the ways in which violence past and trauma-related memories are memorialized (Connerton, 1989) as well as the curation and construction of memorials and other monuments (Young, 1993).

During 1998/1999, Kosova went through a devastating war with a toll of over 13,500 people killed, 800,000 forcibly displaced (Center, 2011) and 20,000 raped women (Watch, Kosovo: Rape as a Weapon of "Ethnic Cleansing", 2000). The practices of remembering the 1998/99 war in Kosova through memorials have become an exclusive domain of men, with a lack of visibility and representation of women. Only one memorial is dedicated to women, the one for the victims of wartime sexual violence. "The Heroine's Memorial" is located at the center of Prishtina, the capital city of Kosova and it honors the "unknown heroines" of the war in Kosova. This memorial stands as a sign of respect for women's contribution and sacrifice during the war. Inaugurated on 12.06.2015, on the 15th anniversary of the liberation of Kosova, "The Heroines Memorial" is considered to be a turning point in the discourse and public representation of wartime sexual violence in Kosova. Constructed from 20,454 medals that form a woman's face, it conveys the message that victims of wartime sexual violence are heroines, this memorial is a point of reference for any discussion about wartime sexual violence in Kosova. Because of this memorial, the concept of heroism has become the subject when talking about the victims. Although its idea was the public confrontation to return attention to these women, considering their history as a

collective issue that should not remain in the private sphere and their personal lives, the way how it was done, leaves room for many questions and improvements.

The brief historical context of Kosova-Serbia Relations

The territory of the Western Balkans has been considered a hotbed of war and conflict, particularly in the 1990s. International attention was gripped especially by Kosova's War 1998-99 and the NATO bombing. I was born right after the war, at a time when my family and all other families in Kosova had to start from scratch. I didn't experience the war, but I was, and I am still affected by all the postwar hardships. To contextualize my knowledge and information about Kosova I will use my positionality (Smith, 1989) as a post-memory generation of a very dramatic war. Writing about your own country's history and its past can be very difficult, especially if this topic is contentious and still presents problems today. Growing up hearing memories and stories (mostly from my mother and grandmother), about violence and war, helped me realize that it is people themselves who have the power to change. I became accustomed to hearing political discussions that have been concerning various actors about the case of my country – disputes that belonged to the past: if the intervention was legal or illegal up to the present on how to work for socializing a fragile society with European values. After the war, Kosova was thrown into a political mist, venality, and civil unrest; and the post-conflict reconstruction became a challenge for its citizens.

When speaking about the conflict between Kosova and Serbia one should keep in mind the context of events development from various aspects and put emphasis on the economic and political circumstances. Kosova was part of Yugoslavia as its autonomous province. "The autonomous provinces of Kosova and Vojvodina were granted a status that was roughly similar to that of the six republics Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia" (Krieger, 2011). At the end of the 80s, a new chapter began for Kosova, when Serbian government abolished Kosova's autonomy on March 23, 1989 (Amstutz, 2018). The 1990s marked the period when massive violations of human rights, cultural, political, and socioeconomic oppression as well as systematic and institutionalized violence began. The decade of Slobodan

Milosevic, often recognized as the decade when violent measures were imposed, led to the segregation between Serbs and Albanians. Around 135,000 Kosova Albanians who were employed in any capacity within the public sector were fired and denied the right to any material compensation (Tromp, 2016). Also, this process included the closures of schools for children in Kosova, as well as the University of Prishtina. Faced with the situation when they were excluded from public participation and institutions, people in Kosova considered “nonviolence as an option for survival” (Clark H. , 2000) which gave rise to the parallel system of the 1990s. Including the education, health, and economic system. People's private homes were turned into places where students continued their education, known as “schoolhouses”, they became a place for 266,413 students in primary education, 58,700 in secondary education, and 16,000 in the parallel university until 1998 (Judah, 2008). After almost ten years of following the non-violent resistance, the situation in Kosova had worsened. This situation forced switching from non-violent to armed resistance, which led to the 1998/1999 war in Kosova.

Wartime in Kosova

The first armed battle between Ushtria Clirimtare e Kosoves (UCK) (English version: Kosova Liberation Army, KLA) and Serbian police forces took place on February 28th, 1998 at Likoshan. As a sign of revenge, the Serbian forces undertook an offensive and massacred 24 civilians Kosovar Albanians, all residents of the villages of Qirez and Likoshan. Also, a week later, on March 5, 6, and 7, the next battle known as the “Jasharai War” took place, where the Jasharai family was attacked by the police and the Serbian forces for three consecutive days. During the attack about 50 civilians were killed, including children, women, and elderly people, all members of the Jashari family (Watch, 1998). According to the statistics, 80% of victims of the 1998-99 war in Kosova were Albanians (Center, 2011).

The violence and terror perpetrated by Serbian forces on the civilian population in Kosova attracted international attention and subsequent intervention. March 24, 1999, marks the day when The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) launched a bombing campaign against Serbia (NATO, 1999). This was considered a humanitarian intervention. As a sign of retaliation, during these days, there were “mass murders, destruction of civilian property and other war crimes,

committed by Serbian forces, likewise rape and other sexual assaults served as weapons of war and tools of organized ethnic cleansing in Kosova in 1999" (Watch, Kosovo: Rape as a Weapon of "Ethnic Cleansing", 2000). The NATO bombing ended on June 9, 1999, when the Kumanova Agreement was signed, which forced the Serbian forces to withdraw from Kosova. Since then, June 12, 1999 is marked as the day of the liberation for Kosova. Today, Kosova is an independent country. It declared its independence on February 17, 2008.

Wartime rape

The use of sexual violence during the war helps us understand and recognize that the body is not neutral--it is gendered, ethnicized, racialized, and inscribed with various meanings. Sexual violence has always been used as a weapon of war; "rape, torture, and sexual violence have been endemic during armed conflict for centuries" (Mitchell, 2005) and most victims are girls and women. This does not, however, rule out the fact that boys and men are also victims of sexual violence during the conflict.

According to the report of the United Nations Secretary-General, the term "conflict-related sexual violence refers to rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage, and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls, or boys that are directly or indirectly linked to a conflict" (Secretary-General, 2018). Sexual violence occurs in everyday life during peacetime; it is not limited by time or space, and anyone can be a victim of it. It becomes a weapon in armed conflicts when it is used as a systematic strategy to harm the opposing party, "when it occurs in a specific context and conflict dynamics and is applied to achieve specific conflict-related goals" (Clark J. , 2009).

Women bear a double burden in ethnic conflicts, as violence against them intersects two dimensions of their identity. The first is belonging to a specific ethnic group, and the second is based on gender. Sexual violence of war aims to obliterate not only the victim but also the community to which they belong. Women are seen as symbols of the group's biological continuity and are associated with the "natural" role of bearing children" (Yuval-Davis, 1997) since they are considered defenders of ethnic and nationalist identity, they become targets of sexual violence

during the conflict. The woman's body is regarded as the bearer of culture, honor, and moral integrity, hence sexual violence against them has symbolic and cultural significance "that turns women's bodies into battlegrounds of the war" (Brownmiller, 1975).

Although sexual violence during conflicts has always been present, it was not recognized as an international crime until 1992. The rape camps in Bosnia brought the issue of sexual violence during the war to the forefront of the international conversation. This subject came to the attention when UN Security Council at its 3150th meeting, on 18 December 1992, declared the "massive, organized and systematic detention and rape of women, particularly Muslim women, in Bosnia and Herzegovina as an international crime that must be addressed" (Council, 1992).

Wartime rape in Kosova

"At that moment I just wanted to die, with a bullet, nothing else...I begged him to kill me." (Krasniqi V. , 2018). This is how Vafrije Krasniqi, a victim-survivor of war and sexual violence in Kosova, describes what happened to her on April 14, 1999. She was 16 years old when a Serbian police officer raped her. Vafjia is the first woman who shared her story publicly. 20,000 other women and girls have been subjected to sexual violence by Serbian forces during the war in Kosova (Watch, Kosovo: Rape as a Weapon of "Ethnic Cleansing", 2000). Yet, we don't know them because everything starts and ends with numbers when we talk about them. Even my essay starts with numbers - 20000. This number became synonymous with what was done to them during the war. Still, after twenty-four years they remain unknown and silent. During the 1998-1999 war in Kosova, "rape was used as a weapon of ethnic cleansing" (Watch, 2000). Referring to this report "the most common were raped in women's homes when other family members were also there, in front of their children and husbands and usually occurred in groups, known as gang rape involving more than one perpetrator" (Watch, Kosovo: Rape as a Weapon of "Ethnic Cleansing", 2000). Most of the rapes were committed by Serbian paramilitaries. These military formations had support and cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior of Serbia and the Yugoslav Army. The same strategy of rape was used by Serbian paramilitaries in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Cherif Bassiouni & Marcia McCormick, 1996).

On her public confession, Vafije Krasniqi remembers the words that the Serbian soldier said to her during the act of rape: "*Do you see the wound on my hand, the KLA, your father, your brothers hurt me, now you have to pay for it*". The use of these words can be explained by the theory developed by the feminist theorist Ruth Seifert where she criticizes the approach that sees wartime rape as a sexually motivated act, thus excluding the idea that sexual aggression stems from sexual desire "rape is not an aggressive expression of sexuality, but a sexual expression of aggression. In the perpetrator's psyche, it does not fulfill sexual functions but is a manifestation of anger, violence, and domination" (Seifert, 1996).

The battle for recognition

UNMIK's failure

In post-war societies, it is very difficult to start a conversation about the crimes and violations of human rights that occurred during the war, with special emphasis on sexual violence. It takes a lot of courage to discuss public secrets. "Due to a combination of different factors as cultural and social discomfort with sex and sexual violence, victims refuse to talk because they want to avoid the shame and stigma that is associated with sexual victimization" (Zaleski, 2018). Once the conflict is over, there is a lot of attention on moving forward and recovering. Thus, leaving out the point that dealing with the past is as important. Dealing with the violent past is an important pillar that contributes to the conduct of justice for the victims because this will also contribute to the reshaping of social relations after the conflict.

After the war, Kosova was administered by an International Peacekeeping Mission "The United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo" UNMIK (UNITED NATIONS, 1999). As sociologist Gëzim Selaci notes "the process of state building from "outsiders" often does not contain enough information about the specific context in which the state-building project will be implemented" (Selaci, 2008). The complexities of governing as an outsider render themselves visible in the approach that could be interpreted as future-oriented, where dealing with the past and restorative justice was not part of the agenda.

The stigma of sexual violence on the other hand caused the wartime rape issue to be silenced for more than a decade after the war. Feminist researchers and women-led NGOs were the only ones directly trying to aid the survivors of sexual violence in Kosova. During 1999 when half of Kosova's population were refugees in Albania, Macedonia, and Montenegro, different women NGOs directly aided women and girls who had been victims of sexual violence and experienced other traumatic events during the war. Sevdije Ahmeti, founder of the Center for Women and Children in 1993 was among the first to raise the issue of sexual violence during the war into the public discourse. Ahmeti highlighted the widespread frequency of rape during 1998-1999 "In post-war Kosova, the victim of sexual violence was isolated from the community, even from the family, this shows how sexual violence is seen as an act of guilt and not as a crime against her or him" (Ahmeti, 2005).

In 2001 UNMIK approved regulation no. 2000/664 on "Benefits for War Invalids of Kosovo and for the Next of Kin of those who died as a result of the Armed Conflict in Kosovo" which included monthly pensions or social benefits only for the families of combatants and civilians who had been killed or wounded during the conflict (UNMIK, 2001). The victims of wartime sexual violence were not included here. Justice for the victims was not perused by the UNMIK administration. Even after the testimonies of victims in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. The ICTY was "established by The United Nations to condemn war crimes in the former Yugoslavia between 1991 and 2001" (ICTY, United Nations | International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals, 1993). However, it took the ICTY a long time to at least prove that wartime rape in Kosova was not an isolated crime but was embedded in the campaign of ethnic cleansing. The ICTY considered the sexual violence that occurred during the war in Kosova only after extensive work by feminist activists and NGOs based on field evidence and Human Rights Watch Report. The process of seeking justice was slow and very painful, furthermore, some women came forward with their testimonies and reported that they could identify their perpetrators (for example in those cases where the victims knew the perpetrators, they were either neighbors or residents of towns/villages) but they were never prosecuted.

The fact that UNMIK failed to ensure justice for victims of war sexual violence is also confirmed by monitoring reports by Amnesty International "impunity for war crimes involving rape or other

forms of gender-based violence continues, no prosecutions in the Kosova courts to record testimonies and support the victims of such violence" (International, 2006).

Forget Flowers: We Want Justice”

The women's movement in Kosova against the institutionalized violence by Serbian government has a long legacy, as Eli Krasnqi points out that “the political engagement of women in Kosovo was in response to the multiple oppression of Albanians in the SFRY, and specifically within the Socialist Republic of Serbia (SRS) and later during the 1990s" (Krasnqi E. , 2021). 2023 marked the 35th year since March 8 is manifested as a protest day in Kosova. March 8, 2000, marks one of the first post-war protests in Kosova organized by the Kosova Women's Network as a call for justice for all who forcibly disappeared during the war (Halili, 2018). Another protest related to justice-seeking for all war victims took place on 8 March 2006. "We don't want flowers" was the motto of the 2006 protest, when feminists demanded the participation of women at the negotiating table with Serbia regarding the final status of Kosova (Network, 2006).

The victims of the sexual violence of the war in Kosova, besides enduring suffering of the trauma had to face a deep social stigma. In 2012, the Assembly of Kosova discussed the “Law of Status and The Rights of the Martyrs, Invalids, Veterans, Members of Kosovo Liberation Army, Civilian Victims of War and Their Families” (04/L-054, 2012). Based on this law all people under these categories would benefit from compensation as a monthly pension. The Assembly excluded the victims of wartime sexual violence from this law under the pretense that it has been a long time and it is too late to verify the victims. Although everyone knew that sexual violence occurred during the war in Kosova and victims needed support from the state and society, the institutions of Kosova did not consider them as a category that fit this law. After this discussion in the Assembly, the Kosova Women’s Network (KWN) organized protests, and campaigns expressing their indignation at this decision of the Assembly. “We don't want flowers; we want justice for women and girls raped during the war" (Aliu, 2012) called for attention to the situation of victims of war sexual violence. Their main request was that sexual violence that occurred during the

1998/1999 war in Kosova should not remain only on the four walls of the house and victims should be included in the law for compensation. A few months after the protest, on March 13, 2013, a draft bill was brought to the Assembly of Kosova by the oppositional left-wing party the “Vetëvendosje”, which demanded that the victims of wartime sexual violence should be included under the “Law of Status and The Rights of the Martyrs, Invalids, Veterans, Members of Kosovo Liberation Army, Civilian Victims of War and Their Families” with the right to compensation in the form of financial support, including rehabilitation and health care. Discussions in the parliament unveiled deep sexism and prejudice and led to a lot of heated debate transmitted on live TV that left the nation staggered by the language used by deputies of majority parties. Some of the excerpts from the statements of that day illustrate the discourse of the first time the issue of wartime sexual violence was openly discussed in the Parliament of Kosova¹

- “the statistics about the women raped during the war, are very weird” (page 65)
- “it is very difficult to prove because there is no gynecological expertis” (page 69)
- “we don’t have exact statistics related to this category” (page 70)
- “one could say, if there are 20.000 raped women in Kosova, what are these men still doing there, why are they still living there” (page 83)
- “Comes a point when we don't have money anymore, they will still be a burden to society” (page 86)
- “as for the other category mentioned in this draft bill” (page 89)
- “the name of the law is not correct. There should have been a separate law for veterans and members of the Kosovo Liberation Army and a special law for the other category we are discussing today” (page 90)

The debate regarding this draft bill was a clear example of how deep the social stigma towards victims of wartime sexual violence in Kosova was. The statements above could be used

¹ These statements are excerpted from the transcript of the discussion held in the Assembly of Kosova, on 12.03.2013. The transcript is provided by email by the Assembly archive and is available only in the pdf version.

to exemplify it and reveal deeper social practices which are rooted in certain values. In Hall's words, language is a "representational system" (Hall, 1997). Based on the language used by the assembly members, they represented a suppressed normative approach to the concept of sexual violence.

The first noticeable thing in this debate is the dichotomy of sexual violence. In their statements, only women are the subjects of sexual violence (women who have been raped, gynecological expertise, raped women in Kosova). In fact, this is a problem that has been addressed by different scholars and "triggered a feminist backlash" (Clark J. , 2009). According to feminist researcher Dubravka Žarkov "if women are already defined as rapeable, then rape defines femininity as violability and becomes a female mode of being" (Žarkov, 1997). This approach can be very harmful to male victims of sexual violence.

While some assembly members refer to the victims only as women, for them the victims of wartime sexual violence are just the other category. Othering and dehumanization are the processes of making someone seem fundamentally different from you or your group "as the opposite of that which is seen to be acceptable" (Rohleder, 2014). Assembly members don't even want soldiers and veterans to be grouped under the same category as victims of sexual violence. In fact, including all the victims under the same law is very problematic because the heterogeneity of their experiences and sufferings is denied. But, in this case, this is not the argument on which the assembly members relied. The process of social categorization of victims of wartime sexual violence can be explained through the theory of social identity (Henri Tajfel & John Turner, 1986).

This theory explains prejudice between social groups based on certain characteristics which are attributed to a group, thus creating ingroup (us) and out-group (they) relations. We see the tendency of positioning the victims of sexual as out-group compared to soldiers and veterans. They are considered the opposite because of the attributes that a soldier or veteran wears, and for this, they should have a separate law and be treated as the group that brought freedom. Therefore, including victims of wartime sexual violence in the same law is considered unacceptable and humiliating.

Medical examination as a method to know the exact number of victims is one of the most degrading things that can be requested of a victim of sexual violence after 15 years. Adding here the fact that wartime sexual violence, and sexual violence in general, is one of the most silent and unreported crimes, so the demand for the exact number of victims as a criterion to acknowledge what happened to them is illogical. Feminist activists in Kosovo responded to this sexist and degrading discussion with protests. One of them was “examination” by “HAVEIT”, who are a collective of four feminists that challenge oppression and patriarchy in Kosova and address it through creative protests in public spaces. In a public performance at the central square of Prishtina, on a bed blanket, they hit apples with a hammer, thus demonstrating the examination that the assembly members were looking for.



Figure 1 Public performance "Haveit" Prishtine, March 2013

After many sexist discussions, the law was finally passed in 2013 although several Assembly members voted against it. The passing of this law marked the opening of the debate on the issue of wartime rape in Kosova, and it was the first time that the victims of this crime were recognized on the institutional level. Furthermore, it was a good starting point to open the conversation about the representation of women in public spaces and strategies that should be used to remove the stigma about wartime sexual violence.

² HAVEIT 2013, <https://www.in-situ.info/the-network/artists/2011-2016-artists/haveit>

Public representation of wartime sexual violence in Kosova

Memorialization and its Role in postwar societies

Each social group has its references on which it builds its history and constantly remembers it through different narratives or practices, references that continue to have importance to them and serve as unifying elements of identity. Numerous scholars consider collective memory closely related to the sociology of knowledge, considering it as its subfield (Olick & Robbins, 1998).

Preservation of collective memory in modern society, alongside the cognitive role of the past, also has a reconstructive character. There are different ways in which memory is preserved and manifested: oral history, commemorations, rituals, memorials, etc. The reconstruction of the past is based on the way events are remembered, how they are interpreted, what is selected from them, and what they are used for. Knowing the importance of the past, especially its integrating and mobilizing function, political and ideological elites very often have politicized, ideologized, and even mythologized the past. For these elites, it is very important to “control the collective memory” of the group, constructing and reconstructing a particular narrative of the past, particularly recent events to “claim a privileged connection to the past, stating continuity or rupture to support their current viewpoint” (Jelin, 1993).

After the war, every society needs a narrative on which to rely for what happened and to process their cultural trauma. According to Neil Smelser, cultural trauma is a “memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is (a) laden with negative affect, (b) represented as indelible, and (c) regarded as threatening a society’s existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions” (Smelser, 1998). One of the ways they give life to this narrative is through the process of memorialization. Memorials are significant for the commemoration of the past thus also serving as a source of historical information for the community. Different scholars have different perspectives on the function of memorials and commemoration. Some consider memorials as a necessary practice for collective solace through which victims are remembered, while others consider them as instruments on which nation-building is possible. In the book “Sites

of Memory, Sites of Mourning” Jay Winter explains that the culture of commemoration is a form of consolation for the community that tries to locate the trauma in a physical space. At the same time, it serves as a reaction to pain, and misfortune and as a response to questions like “how to accept the shock of the war” (Winter, 1995). Meanwhile, for Winter memorials are more of a personal process that helps the community cope with the loss, for (Mosse, 1991) in his book “Fallen Soldiers” memorialization procession is a practice that helps nationalism construct the myth for the nation. He supports his idea, with the fact that nations attach special importance to these processes and even use them as instruments to legitimize themselves. In the same line as Mosse, anthropologist (Das, 1995) points out that the historical memory of war is the central point of the constitution of the identity and history of a group. The violent past becomes a point of reference for the definition of self and community.

Heroes of the war

Lieux de memoire (sites of memory) was first used by Pierre Nora to describe the need to preserve physical objects to keep old memories alive in "public consciousness" (Nora, 1989). In Kosova, after the war, the main agents of remembrance were families or local communities, and “lieux de memoire” were mostly built on a private initiative, mostly from the family members or local community with very little or no institutional involvement. Mostly built of stones or simple slabs, they reminded of the sacrifice and were places where pain materialized. In most cases, the people remembered were men, that is, fathers or brothers.

The practices of memorialization in Kosova are mainly based on elevating virtues such as courage, honor, and sacrifice. What is observed in these memorialization practices is the lack of commemoration for the civilian victims of the war and women, leaving a shadow of history and their experiences. 1,024 children were killed during the 1998-99 war (Center, 2011) but Kosova does not have a memorial to remember them. Initiatives to commemorate civilian victims do not go beyond the initiatives of non-governmental organizations and the local community. Women, hardly appear at all in these memorials.

Public spaces in Kosova are filled with large monuments of heroes holding large weapons in their hands, overshadowing the experiences of the rest of society, such as women, children, and civilian victims. Women are rarely remembered, “they are not visible in its history of independence narrative or in the post-war commemoration landscape” (Luci, 2014). Women’s heroism falls under the category of suffering and pain.

In general, the entire narrative about the war of 1998/1999 is gendered, men are portrayed as heroes of freedom while women are only in a suffering category. Such a perspective on the gendering of war is offered by (Elshtain, 1987) on her book "Women and War" where she challenges conventional ways of portraying the role of women in war by asserting that gender roles prevail even during wartime (men are strong, protective soldiers, while women because of their "characteristics", like softness and beauty are not suitable for fighting). Every city in Kosova counts dozens of busts that proclaim, "the heroism of the fallen soldiers and their sacrifice for the liberation war" (Baliqi, 2018) while, throughout Kosova, the busts, memorials, for women and their contribution to this war, can be counted on the fingers of one hand. The names of streets, schools, and other institutions in large numbers are named in honor of men soldiers, thus completely denying, and forgetting the contribution of women in the Kosova Liberation Army, as Fox mentioned that “While national collective memorialization may bring hope and empowerment to some survivors, it can disappoint and exclude others” (Fox, 2021).

Regarding the legal framework of memorials related to the 1998/99 war in Kosova, there are currently two laws. The first law is a law of the national level (Law no. 04/L-146) based on which the Agency for the Management of Memorial Complexes of Kosova (AMMCK) operates. The status of the "Adem Jashari Memorial Complex" is regulated by a different law (Law No.06/L-059, 2018). While men's heroism is built on their contribution as active participants and liberators of the country, women's heroism is built on their passive experiences such as suffering and victimization. Through the lenses of memorialization, this is best demonstrated by the “Memoriali Heroinat” (The Heroines Memorial) which is in the center of the capital city, Prishtina, and from a total of 104 memorials that AMMCK counts in its register only this memorial is dedicated to women.



Figure 2 The heroines memorial, Prishtine

The “unique” face of our heroines

“Honoring the Heroines of Kosovo” (Archello, 2015) this is how the author, describes the purpose of “The Heroines Memorial”. Based on his words, this memorial stands for the contribution and sacrifice of women during the war, including here the victims of wartime sexual violence. A memorial that represents the “unique face of women in Kosova” through 20,145 medals.

“This memorial is built by 20,145 medals, which symbolically honor the versatile contribution and sacrifice of every ethnic Albanian woman during the 1998-1999 war in Kosovo. At the same time, this memorial remembers the cruel crime of rape carried out by the Serbian forces during the last war, against nearly 20,000 women. By joining the contributions and sacrifices of all women, the huge portrait of the Kosovar heroin is shaped. The portrait reflects values of dignity, dedication, education, care, courage, and endurance”³

As mentioned above, "The Heroines Memorial" is the first memorial for wartime sexual violence, and at the same time, it is the first memorial dedicated to women in Kosova. Its purpose was twofold, first, intended to break up the tradition of male monopoly when it comes to representation in public spaces, and second, it was an attempt to address the silence and stigma of wartime sexual violence. An in-depth reading of this memorial reveals the roots of a patriarchal mindset. While, for the men, a separate memorial or bust is built for each of them, on the other hand, the women are all included under a single memorial. All wartime experiences of women in Kosova, adding here the victims of sexual violence, are fused under the same representation, in

³ Written words on “The Heroinat Memorial” plaque, Prishtine, Kosove.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's words, under "the discursively consensual homogeneity of women" (Mohanty, 1988). Lumping all women under the same narrative for their contribution and sacrifice and portraying them as a unique face is wrong. Because, in this way, the complexity and intersectionality between different experiences and realities are ignored and fall into grouping women as a universal category. This memorial has been adapted to the dominant narrative "where sacrifice and contribution to the national project and the building of the state are considered to be the only way of belonging and acceptance in society" (Gusia,2018). It has even gone so far that being a victim of wartime sexual violence is considered a heroic act. Referring to victims of wartime sexual violence as heroines raise questions and ambiguities about how rape can be considered an act of sacrifice and contribution? This approach does not help remove the stigma or empower the victims. On the contrary, it places them at the center of the nation's honor and their contribution is reduced in the frames of exploitation of the body. Being a victim of sexual violence is not an act of contribution or heroism because none of the victims chose to be sexually abused as a sign of contribution and sacrifice for their country. Furthermore, I consider that this memorial denies the victimhood of all those who have been subjected to sexual violence. The deep-rooted conviction that men should be women's protectors stands as a pillar on which wartime rape is supported as a form of humiliating opponents. As (Brownmiller, 1975) elaborates the idea that sexual violence during war is a form of domination not only against women but also against the men who are supposed to protect them. By reflecting on this, I consider that the Heroines Memorial is the materialization of this approach. So, if the men in Kosova were not able to protect their women, this is marked as a "victory" by the opponents. Thus, if women are seen as victims of sexual violence during the war, it implies the failure of men as their protectors. In a space where being a victim is considered a threat to the narrative of masculinity and war, women are the ones who must negotiate their position in society, even in the most painful and suffering cases. By calling women heroines, men justify their inability to protect them during the war.

At the proposal of the President of the Republic of Kosova, April 14 was declared the Day of Survivors of Sexual Violence during the last war in Kosova (Osmani, 2023). In her statement, President Osmani said that this day is marked as a sign of solidarity with all survivors of sexual violence during the last war. The announcement of such a day marks a very important step

regarding the issue of wartime sexual violence in Kosovo. But we must be aware of the fact that war rapes have victimized many people, some have survived, and some have not. At the national level, a day should be marked that emphasizes a collective memory for everyone who was subject of wartime sexual violence. The experience of sexual violence in war was victimization not "survival". During the war they were not "survivors of sexual violence" they were "victims". This year, the Day of Survivors of Sexual Violence during the last war in Kosovo was marked with a march in the main square in Prishtina, and its destination was at "The heroines memorial" where they conducted speeches, thus once again "the heroines memorial" became the center of all organization.



Figure 3 Speech at "The heroines memorial"⁴

⁴ KRCT - Kosova Rehabilitation Centre for Torture Victims 14.04.2023
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=605522791618862&set=pcb.605527208285087>

Conclusion

The analysis of the public representation of wartime sexual violence in Kosova reveals how women continue to be rewritten in the public consciousness as a unique face without subjectivity and agency. Acknowledging the benevolent intent of the "Memorial to Heroines" as the first public representation for victims of wartime sexual violence, we must be aware that representation is simply not enough, much less when it contributes to the social construction of gendered memories by being one-dimensional. Rooted in the rhetoric of heroism, this public intervention does not challenge prejudice and public stigma but reproduces the discourse that sexual violence is associated with shame and honor. Being "first" is meaningless if the goal is not to broker strategies to facilitate public discussion that would lead to the improvement of the lives of these victims. Such commemorations and interventions in public spaces require the involvement of feminist researchers and activists, so that visual stories depicting rape, subjugation and other forms of torture do not remain only on a formal level and their final goal is not just the public representation but serve to create new paths for discussion and representation of this issue.

Throughout my essay, I refer to the subjects of wartime rape as victims, always being aware that those who are still alive survive every day in the face of stigma, trauma, and the painful past. Despite this, the narrative about the war in Kosova has mostly remained at the level of glorification and the historical trajectory shows an unwillingness of our institutions to face the past, emphasizing here the initiatives for pursuing justice for the victims of wartime sexual violence. Moreover, an official historiography of the war has not yet been established and there are only a few texts documenting this history. By relying on this, the risk of social amnesia as an indirect effect of attempts to empower the victims is real, even more when it is found in a political context like that of Kosova currently.

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