



## It happened to boys and men too

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**Abstract:** Wartime sexual violence serves as a tool for constructing and negotiating power among various cultural, religious, and ethnic groups. Consequently, it is of utmost importance to address all forms of sexual violence that occurred during the war in Kosovo, regardless of the gender of the victims.

The use of sexual violence during the war makes us understand and recognise that the body is not neutral — it is gendered, ethnicised, racialised, and inscribed with various meanings. Even though most victims are [girls and women](#), this does not rule out the fact that boys and men are also victims of sexual violence during armed conflicts, but this has largely gone unnoticed, despite its prevalence. According to a 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 as perpetrated against women, men, girls, or boys that are directly or indirectly linked to a conflict.

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The use of sexual violence as a weapon in armed conflicts occurs when it is used as a deliberate strategy to harm the opposing party in a particular context and is applied to achieve conflict-related goals. This egregious tactic, designed to inflict both physical and psychological harm, has left a lasting impact on societies grappling with the aftermath of armed conflicts.

The region of Southeast Europe is not an exception when it comes to these devastating trends, especially when considering the 1990s conflicts. It is estimated that around [20.000 women](#) were raped by Serbian forces during the war in Kosova, while the scale of wartime sexual violence against men and boys is still unknown. Immediately following the war, organisations such as [Human Rights Watch](#) related the systematic nature of the crimes to the Slobodan Milošević regime's ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosova. There were also rumors of sexual violence against boys and men during the war, though no one was ready to share his story or experience.

Besides enduring suffering from the trauma, the victims of sexual violence during the war in Kosova 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 belonging to these categories would benefit from a monthly pension. Nevertheless, the Assembly excluded the victims of wartime sexual violence from this law under the pretense that it occurred a long time ago and it is too late to establish who are the victims. Although everyone knew that victims needed support from both the state and society, the institutions of Kosova did not consider them as a category that fits this law.

A few months after, on March 13, 2013, a draft bill was [brought to the Assembly of Kosova](#) by the oppositional left-wing party 'Vetëvendosje', which demanded that the victims of wartime sexual violence should be included under the above-mentioned law with the right to compensation in the form of financial support, including rehabilitation and health care. Discussions in the Parliament of Kosova unveiled deep sexism and prejudice and led to a lot of heated debate transmitted live on TV, which 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 about the issue of wartime sexual violence as openly addressed for the first time in the Parliament:

*The statistics about the women raped during the war, are very weird.*

*It is very difficult to prove [sexual violence] because there is no gynecological expertise.*

*The name of the law is not correct. There should have been a separate law for veterans and members of the Kosova Liberation Army and a special law for this other category.*

*People from outside Kosova will ask: what were Albanian men doing when Serbian forces raped 20.000 women?*

The first noticeable thing in the debate of the draft bill is the gender bias of sexual violence. In their statements, only women are the subjects of sexual violence. In fact, this is a problem that has been addressed by different scholars and triggered a feminist backlash. 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. This approach can be very harmful to male victims of sexual violence. As a matter of fact, including all the victims under the same law is very problematic because the heterogeneity of their experiences and suffering is denied.

After many sexist discussions, the law was passed in 2013 even though several Assembly members voted against it. It took [five years](#) until survivors of wartime sexual violence were finally given the opportunity to apply for victim status through the [government's Verification Commission](#), which entitles them to a monthly pension. This was a huge step forward for survivors, who began to come forward and share their stories.

The passing of this law marked the opening of the debate on the issue of wartime rape in Kosovo, and it was the first time that the victims of such crimes were recognised on an institutional level. While the law seemed promising and was considered a catalyst for starting a public debate, it ultimately did not live up to expectations. The gendered memory of war, which often portrays men as heroes and liberators, while casting women as victims, created significant barriers for male victims of sexual violence to apply for the pension.

According to organizations that deal with cases of sexual violence during wartime, the number of men seeking their assistance greatly surpasses the number of those who have applied for government pensions. The latest data from the government's Commission on Recognition and Verification of the Status of Sexual Violence Victims shows that 83 men have applied for the status. One of the main reasons may be the practices of remembering the war in Kosovo that are mainly based on elevating virtues such as courage and honour, and the entire narrative about this war is gendered: men are portrayed solely as heroes of freedom.

This narrative creates an uncomfortable space for discussing wartime sexual violence against men and boys. Being in a situation where the memory of this war is rooted in [heroic rhetoric](#) makes it even more difficult for male victims to deal with what happened to them during the war.

### **The limitations of art in challenging gendered narratives of wartime sexual violence**

Even artistic installations are not able to break the gendered memory of the war. Although, well-intentioned, unfortunately, they did not effectively facilitate the coming forward of male victims of wartime sexual violence. Notably, '[Thinking of you](#)' was an artistic installation by Alketa Xhafa Mripa as a tribute to wartime sexual violence in Kosovo. On the biggest football pitch in Kosovo, she called on people to donate a skirt or dress to recognise the survivors and hung thousands of dresses on

washing lines. She chose the stadium as a location for her installation because she considered it a space for men. Initially, this installation showed a rigid division and collision of masculinity and femininity. Moreover, the concept on which this installation was built only reaffirmed the impossibility of overcoming the discourse that sees sexual violence as something that happened only to women, and it was closely related to honor and cleanliness.

Male victims of sexual violence remain conspicuously absent from this narrative of 'heroism', leaving them marginalised and unable to find a place within this framework. As a result, their silence on their experiences deepens, further highlighting the challenges they face in acknowledging and addressing their victimisation. Another public representation worth noting is the ['Heroines Memorial'](#), constructed using 20,000 pins to create the image of a woman's face and honoring the victims of wartime sexual violence as heroes who made significant contributions and sacrifices to Kosovo's liberation. This memorial aligns with the prevailing narrative that places a high value on sacrifice and contributions to the national project and the state-building process, considering them the sole means of belonging and acceptance within society.

Therefore, the focus of installations on gendered war memory inadvertently reinforced societal stereotypes and norms that stigmatise male survivors. By exclusively addressing female survivors and their experiences, they imply that sexual violence in conflict was a uniquely feminine issue. This approach alienated male survivors, making it even more challenging for them to share experiences and seek support.

### **Looking ahead**

Recognising the broader context, it is imperative to acknowledge that instances of rape and other forms of sexual assault against men are not isolated events but are interconnected with a prevailing social and gender framework that portrays men as inherently aggressive and dominant. To gain a deeper insight into the complex relationship between sexual violence, gender constructs, and power dynamics in times of armed conflict, we must move beyond the simplistic notion that rape solely manifests as male dominance over women.

Wartime sexual violence serves as a tool for constructing and negotiating power among various cultural, religious, and ethnic groups. Consequently, it is of utmost importance to address all forms of sexual violence that occurred during the war in Kosovo, regardless of the gender of the victims. The establishment of safe spaces where survivors can openly share experiences, free from discrimination or judgement, is crucial, as every survivor deserves a platform to be heard and supported.

Our objective should revolve around crafting mediation strategies that promote public discourse, thereby enhancing the well-being of survivors and fostering an environment conducive to open, [stigma-free](#) discussions and representations of such critical issues.