



Sexual violence as a weapon of war - support to victims and survivors

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On June 12, 2022, Kosovo marked the 23rd anniversary of freedom. Many people still remember that day. With the pain of the losses and hardships experienced and the relief that the nightmare was over, they were embarking towards the next chapter. One where they were free, and the war was in the past. Yet, among all, there was one group whose war did not end with the NATO intervention – the survivors of sexual violence during the war. As many took out the streets to greet the NATO soldiers and celebrate freedom, their part of the celebration was tainted. As many shared their stories of loss, torture, injury, and trauma, they could not share theirs. Unlike others, their experience loaded them with shame and guilt that was unjustly placed on them.

Throughout history we have witnessed brutal cases of sexual violence against women and men in numerous conflicts. Yet, it wasn't until the works of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, that rape was recognized for what it was – a weapon of war. Until then, it was seen as a by-product and an unfortunate casualty. However, it is a weapon designed to tear the social fabric of a population, by unjustly putting the blame on the victim, rather than the perpetrator, and having them carry the shame, guilt, and impact of the rape long after the conflict is over. Sexual violence against women in particular is strategically used as tool to emasculate the men of the other party - a way to call them out as weak for not being able to “protect” the women, a role seen as one of the core duties of men in patriarchal societies. Women end up paying the price – they carry the shame aimed at the men, the guilt for what they experienced, and often the burden to move forward as nothing had happened. That is why the recognition of rape as a weapon of war has been monumental. Conflict-related sexual violence could not begin to be properly addressed without the understanding that it is not a by-product, collateral damage, or isolated cases, but instead it is deeply ingrained in the strategy of the war itself.

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As in many countries, in Kosovo there is no exact number of survivors of sexual violence during the war. Most of the survivors did not report it. Some of them lost their lives either because they were murdered after the rape, died due to the horrific injuries, or committed suicide. We will never know the full extent of this crime in the Kosovo war. Yet, it is estimated that about 20,000 women and men of Kosovo experienced sexual violence, as a tactic of war. Some of these acts ended with pregnancies, often forcing women to undergo unsafe abortions or put their babies up for adoption.

Starting over in the aftermath of a war is incredibly difficult. Everything is urgent and a priority. The people of Kosovo were very courageous in doing everything they could to rebuild their lives. Yet, in the midst of all the priorities and the efforts to continue forward, unfortunately, addressing the matter of the survivors of sexual violence was not in the agenda. In the absence of attention from relevant authorities, women activists began working directly with survivors, trying to provide emergency services. Yet, it took time for survivors to come to the local organizations offering help, and often even more time to open up to them.

In spite of the challenging context, women activists were vocal, and kept fighting the silence and the social taboo of this horrendous war crime. In 2014, under the leadership of Atifete Jahjaga, President of the Republic of Kosovo, the National Council on the Survivors of Sexual Violence during the War in Kosovo was established by Presidential decree. The council brought together stakeholders to coordinate efforts to meet the needs of the survivors, from recognition of their status to reparation, access to justice, and fight to end stigma. In the same year, the Parliament amended the Law on the Status of War Veterans and Families of the Civilian Victims to include the survivors of sexual violence during the war. Based on this amendment, in 2015, the Government of Kosovo passed a regulation to establish a special commission that would facilitate the distribution of individual benefits. The Government Commission on Recognition and Verification of the Status of Sexual Violence Victims During the Kosovo Liberation War began its operations in 2018. With the support of four organizations licensed to aid the application process, the Commission delicately reviews each case placed in front of them, in an effort to offer them overdue recognition and reparation. These efforts are being used as best practices by other countries in similar position. According to the Commission, to date, they have received a total of 1,712 applications, out of which 1,274 were approved to receive recognition and reparation - 1,217 of these survivors were women, whereas 57 were men.

Stigma is one of the main reasons behind the underreporting of the cases of sexual violence during the war. In conflict related sexual violence, it is the victim that faces a public trial and is found guilty in it. In order to avoid this, most survivors stay silent. In these cases, sharing the pain with others doesn't make it easier. Quite the opposite – it

makes it utterly difficult. For over a decade after the war, when we spoke of survivors of sexual violence in Kosovo, we referred to the estimated number of cases, the anonymous stories that organizations shared on their behalf, or few interviews with face and voice alteration that ensured anonymity. This made it easier to treat the matter as foreign, particularly since we were already in denial that such cruel acts had happened to us. In the meantime, the survivors continued their lives in fear that their stories will come out and that they will face the harsh consequences of the stigma surrounding their experience.

The first spark of hope was the art installation *Thinking of You* by Alketa Xhafa – Mripa, implemented in 2015 under the patronage of the Office of the President of Kosovo. *Thinking of You* brought the people of Kosovo together in solidarity with the survivors. By donating thousands of dresses and skirts that were later hung at the stadium of Prishtina, we showed our empathy – the tool that ultimately reduces the power of stigma. As we started to listen more attentively, we began to make it easier for them to speak up.

We continued with advocacy and campaigns, but the monumental event that opened our minds and hearts was the interview of Vasfije Krasniqi – Blair, a survivor of sexual violence in the Kosovo war. With incredible valor, controlling her tears and emotions, she told us her story – how she was taken and raped at the age of 16. This time, we saw beyond the statistics and the anonymous stories. We saw the person, and the impact of this horrific act of cowardice. Vasfije’s courage made us braver to accept this part of our past and stand with the survivors. This big step for us was overdue, and now insufficient to encourage more survivors to speak out publicly. Aside from Vasfije, there was one other survivor who shared her story, and now the two have become the faces of many other women who have a similar experience.

There are some horrible events in life where surviving one day at a time is heroic. Sexual violence is one of them. Most of the women and men who experienced sexual violence during the war in Kosovo, not only survived, but pushed through their pain. They had family members to care for, and for them that took priority over their experiences of sexual violence. They were raising the future of our country, while living with the shame, guilt, and fear, that was not theirs to begin with. Their sacrifice is heroic, which is why we call them heroines. In the center of Prishtina, there’s a landmark with the face of a graceful woman made by around 20,000 small medals carrying the same image. It is called heroines and made to honor the survivors – to show that while late, we stand by them.

Aside from the social stigma, the lack of justice for survivors of sexual violence in the Kosovo war has been agonizing. It is unbearable to think that someone can do something like this and then live care-free, while you anguish in the shame that ultimately belongs to them. This impunity is a disgrace we continue to carry, as it is a vivid reminder of how

we failed the survivors in so many ways. And this goes beyond Kosovo – it is a global disgrace. When justice is served, survivors find peace, and a strong message is conveyed that impunity is not tolerated and perpetrators of this crime are rightfully convicted. It can serve as a deterrent in ongoing and potential conflicts. Without justice, we continue to give free passes to perpetrators and convict the survivors to a life in silence, shame, guilt, and fear.

On June 19, we mark the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict. Seven years ago, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed this day in service of increased awareness to end conflict-related sexual violence and in honor of survivors. It is a global unification towards one cause, where we must be uncompromising. Yet, as conflicts in different places of the world continue, and as women and men in these areas remain targets and experience vicious acts of sexual violence right now, this June 19 must be an urgent call to action at a global and local level.

Kosovo experienced conflict-related sexual violence first-hand and we understand how hard it is to go through it and offer a proper response in the aftermath. It took us time to comprehend and do something about it, and even with the efforts that we made, we still have not done justice by our survivors. That will be a burden that we will have to carry in our conscience forever. That is why it is imperative to take measures that lead to deterrence and prevention. Ultimately, even with the best response, that offers survivors care, an empathetic and understanding society, and justice, it will never be enough.

This June 19, let us honor the unsung heroes – the survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. The ones who continue to fight for a better future, even when the society turns their back to them and does not recognize their pain, but instead judges them for what they experienced. Let us honor them by serving them with dignity and empathy, and by working hard that women and men around the world do not experience what they did.

About the Author

Brikena Avdyli serves as the Executive Director of the Jahjaga Foundation since November 2019. She has a background in diversity and inclusion, with over eight years of experience working with international and local civil society organizations in projects related to inclusion of women, youth, and persons with disabilities in political and electoral processes, as well as workplace. Prior to joining the Jahjaga Foundation, Brikena served in the Office of the President of Kosovo, as President Jahjaga's Adviser. Before that she worked at the International Foundation for Electoral Processes as a Project Officer for four years, managing projects related to inclusion of marginalized groups and public outreach.