

# 'I didn't want this to be a taboo': the fight for Kosovan women raped during the war

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**An artist, an activist and a former president have helped secure a landmark victory for thousands of Kosovans, as the state finally agrees to pay them war pensions**

When [the war in Kosovo](#) began, Feride Rushiti was studying medicine at the University of Tirana in Albania. After she qualified, she volunteered to treat civilian victims of the conflict. In March 1999, she travelled to Kukës on the Albanian border, where hundreds of thousands of refugees had gathered, fleeing a campaign of ethnic cleansing by Serbian forces. It was desperate, confusing, utterly heartbreaking, she says of the largest forced exodus in Europe since the second world war.

Rushiti, an ethnic Albanian from Gjilan in eastern Kosovo, worked by day with the UN's children's agency and at night with [Doctors Without Borders](#). Amid the chaos of those first days, she met a woman whose story would change her life, and with it the lives of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of other women.

The woman had just miscarried. "And she didn't have a chance to bury the child," Rushiti says. "It was difficult to know how to support her. I asked where her husband was. She said, 'They took my husband.' At that moment, I started to cry and so did she. But her cry was unimaginable – I had never heard such a sound. I was holding her, and with the other hand trying to close the tent, as there were people outside. She had been raped."

Rushiti, then 28, had spent much of the 1990s studying medicine in secret in [Kosovo](#), negotiating the Serbian "apartheid" that closed educational and other institutions to ethnic Albanians. But in Kukës she turned her back on her studies and focused on the survivors of wartime sexual violence. "The things I was seeing, the stories I was hearing – I could not imagine human beings would do such things. I knew I had to think beyond my profession as a doctor. I had to be their voice." It wasn't just the psychological trauma that struck her: in Kosovo's deeply patriarchal society, rape was seen as a stain on a family's honour; significant barriers of stigma and blame lay ahead.

After the peace agreement of June 1999, Rushiti founded the [Kosovo Rehabilitation Centre for Torture Victims](#) (KRCT). The following year, [Human Rights Watch](#) described the widespread use of rape, often gang rape, by Serbian police, paramilitaries and soldiers led by Slobodan Milosevic as an "instrument of systematic ethnic cleansing", to humiliate, terrorise and displace ethnic Albanians. Many survivors were thrown out by their husbands; even child survivors were isolated and silenced by their families. Estimates vary, but some sources have claimed that up to 20,000 women (and some men) were victims of sexual violence during the war.

In the years immediately afterwards, nobody wanted to talk about it, Rushiti says. "I would go to communities, but everyone would say, 'Nobody was raped here – why are you talking about it?' The stakes were too high. Men didn't want their wives or daughters to talk because of the stigma, and because it would be admitting that they had been unable to protect them."

Rushiti opened centres in the worst-affected communities to treat physical wounds, before gradually building up enough trust to treat the psychological ones. Her work was not without risk. She was warned against opening a centre in Skenderaj in Drenica, one of the poorest areas of Kosovo and a stronghold of the Kosovo Liberation Army, amid concerns that she would be threatened or even beaten. "I knocked on the door of a house, looking for office space, and they said: 'Who is your boss? Bring me a man.' I was shocked. I could not believe this kind of discrimination was happening." Gender-based violence remains common; a [2015 study](#) suggested that as many as 68% of Kosovan women experience domestic violence.

"If someone said to me now, 'Would you do this job?' I would say no," says Rushiti. "I didn't know the risks. I was young and passionate." But slowly, women began to seek treatment; today, KRCT has more than 400 clients.

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This year has been a milestone for Rushiti and the survivors she represents. This vulnerable, marginalised and often impoverished group has been recognised and compensated by the state, alongside veterans, as victims of war. Since February this year, verified survivors of wartime sexual violence have been able to claim monthly pensions. As a result, more women are coming forward.

When I speak to her at KRCT's HQ in Pristina, Rushiti is a calm, almost serene figure, curled up on a couch and smiling as she recalls the spirit that sustained her in the early days. The first-floor office, on a quiet street overlooking the city's park, is discreet and designed with confidentiality in mind. But in the common areas, including the balcony overlooking the park – a place to smoke when talking becomes too much – staff and clients exchange smiles and hugs. Some clients tell me they are happier here than at home.

Rushiti still has to be tough. When she heard the survivor's pension had been set at €200 (£180) a month, she went to the office of the finance minister, Bedri Hamza, and told him it wasn't enough. "Morally, we can't compensate them," she recalls telling him, "but it has to be a good pension." The next day, the pension was set at €230 a month, around 90% of the average earnings for Kosovan women.

On a shelf in Rushiti's office is a photograph of her with Melania Trump, taken in March this year at the [US State Department Women of Courage Awards](#). Rushiti was recognised for her advocacy, which led to 2017's landmark government commission to consider and verify survivors' applications for war pensions. She believes the pension will now help to lift the stigma and, in a state where female unemployment stands at 57%, also empower more women. "You give them status, you give them a voice – in their families and in their communities. Not only to them, but to their daughters, their sons."

She believes more needs to be done, particularly in terms of justice. Only a handful of perpetrators of wartime sexual violence have ever been brought to trial, a failure of successive justice systems that has been condemned by Amnesty International.

Between them, four women's organisations authorised by the Kosovan government to help victims apply for pensions represent 1,200 survivors. Yet only seven cases relating to systematic rape and sexual assaults have been completed. In the three cases that have gone through the Kosovan courts, all the defendants were acquitted.

While Rushiti's KRCT and other NGOs have helped break the silence over wartime sexual violence, no survivor had ever spoken publicly – until last year, when Vafije Krasniqi, a Kosovan who lives in Dallas, Texas, posted on her Facebook page an open letter to the man who abducted and raped her.

Krasniqi was taken at gunpoint from her home on 13 April 1999 by a man in uniform. In her letter, she recalls how she begged him to kill her instead. It begins: "You hurt me. I was 16 and hadn't experienced life. I was innocent. You grasped on to my youth and you stole it from me without a blink of an eye."

Speaking to a reporter for the first time, Krasniqi, 36, tells me via Skype that she wrote her letter to empower others. "I am not ashamed and I am not afraid. I am going to do my part. Everybody knew that a Serbian police officer took me. Everybody knew you don't take a 16-year-old girl to take a statement."

She left Kosovo in 2001, two years after the war, and is now happily married, with two daughters aged 17 and 11. "I was not made for Kosovo. I couldn't stay," she says. "You have been to Kosovo – you know how it goes. They put the blame on us. My family and friends know my story. I wanted the world to know and I wanted to help other women to speak up. I got so many messages from Albanian women after that post."

A slight figure with long black hair, Krasniqi laughs when I ask about the tattoos visible on her chest. "I am not a typical Albanian woman," she says, revealing that she has a black Albanian eagle on her back and the words "You are my shining star" and "You are my sunshine" etched in ink on each collarbone, one for each daughter.

Unlike the vast majority of survivors, Krasniqi has experienced the powerful effect of justice. In May 2014, she learned that her abductor and a second man who had also raped her, initially acquitted of war crimes by a Mitrovica court, had been found guilty by the court of appeal. They were sentenced to 10 and 12 years in prison.

"Besides my daughters being born, it was the happiest day of my life," she tells me. "It was so much of a vindication, it took away all my suffering." She wipes her eyelids with her fingers, to stop the tears rolling down her cheeks. She smiles but her voice trembles. The memory is bittersweet, her euphoria short-lived: her attackers appealed to the supreme court and the guilty verdict was overturned.

Since her Facebook post, Krasniqi has become an ambassador for survivors of other wars. Last month, she spoke to women from Iraq and the Democratic Republic of the Congo at the UN in Geneva, and she will shortly travel to South Korea to talk to others who were forced into military brothels for Japanese soldiers during the second world war. "It was very emotional," she says of her trip to Geneva. "We were from different backgrounds, cultures and religions, but we all have the same stories, of stigma and blame. It breaks my heart."

Atifete Jahjaga, Kosovo's president between 2011 and 2016, recalls a "nasty debate" in parliament in 2013 as a personal turning point. "I was watching on TV in the office," she says, explaining that the president is allowed into parliament only once a year, unless invited. As politicians debated whether the definition of a war veteran should be expanded to include survivors of sexual violence, lawmakers suggested they should be subjected to gynaecological tests – a measure that caused outrage among activists. "I turned off the TV and said to my team of advisers, 'Guys, be prepared.' There is going to be an open war between the presidency, the institutions of our country and the public."

In a parliamentary democracy, Kosovo's president has a largely ceremonial role. But Jahjaga, previously deputy director of the Kosovo police force, used her platform to push for compensation. A year earlier, in 2012, she had hosted an international summit that led to the Pristina Principles, which affirmed women's rights to political and economic participation, as well as access to security and justice. Among her priorities was the recognition of survivors of sexual violence.

"I didn't want this to be a taboo subject," she says. "I told people, 'This is your mother, your sister, your daughter.' As a state, it is our obligation to treat men and women who have suffered for the liberty and independence of this country equally. We have recognised the suffering of the war veterans, the heroes. But in a country where there are so many battlefields, these women's bodies were turned into battlefields by the paramilitary forces of [Serbia](#). They are our heroes as well."

Jahjaga had no executive powers to force through new legislation, so she came up with a creative solution to get the law changed. In March 2014, she created and chaired the national council for the survivors of sexual violence, bringing together the prime minister, Hashim Thaçi, the president of parliament and the ministries of justice and welfare, as well as international diplomats.

It was a crucial intervention. Less than a month later, the Kosovo assembly approved an amendment to recognise survivors of sexual violence as civilian victims of the war. "What has been achieved since 2012 is a miracle," the former president says, paying tribute to KRCT and other organisations that paved the way. "I am for ever grateful - they have operated with no institutional support."

There was another turning point a year later, in 2015, when artist Alketa Xhafa Mripa unveiled her installation [Thinking Of You](#) (Mendoj Për Ty) in Pristina's football stadium. Jahjaga, whose council sponsored the artwork, describes it as "a #MeToo moment" that made headlines around the world. Thousand of dresses donated by survivors and others were hung on washing lines, a powerful reminder of the war, as well as the symbolism of washing away stigma.

Now 37, Xhafa Mripa left Kosovo in 1997 to study fine art at Central Saint Martins in London with her husband and three, now four, children. She recalls hearing about wartime rape in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, "but then it just vanished. People didn't speak of it."

Years later, while visiting family in Kosovo, she was struck by a television interview with a woman who talked about the war. Her face was hidden by a curtain. She spoke about the silence surrounding wartime sexual violence. "I thought, my God, how could we fail the most fragile people in our society? They experienced the war twice and they suffered the most. When everyone was liberated and they were celebrating, their voices were not being heard."

Sitting on cushions in [the Curled Leaf](#), a tea shop she helps run in north London with her husband, Xhafa Mripa says, "All I was asking for was people to bring a skirt or dress. We should not be ashamed as a society. I got so many messages from survivors after [the artwork was installed]. People said to me, 'You left this country at 17 - how can you think about us?'"

What does she remember when she thinks of Kosovo? "I remember the hospitality, the solidarity and the warmth of the people. Kosovo is my home and I grew up with nature. But there was always struggle and fear - people were suppressed. I see my kids having their own thoughts and opinions, and expressing them freely. My own childhood was happy, but we were always scared of what could happen. It was like being under occupation. It was scary day to day.

"There is hope for Kosovo. Or course, there is corruption and other issues we have to fight. But the country is going in the right direction." So far, 600 survivors have applied for the pension, a tiny percentage of the thousands believed to be eligible. When I ask if 20 years was a long time for the

survivors to wait, Atifete Jahjaga nods. She wants them to have greater recognition, and for Serbia to apologise for its crimes. “Yes, it was too long,” she says. “The war has never ended for them.”

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## **Karen McVeigh**

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