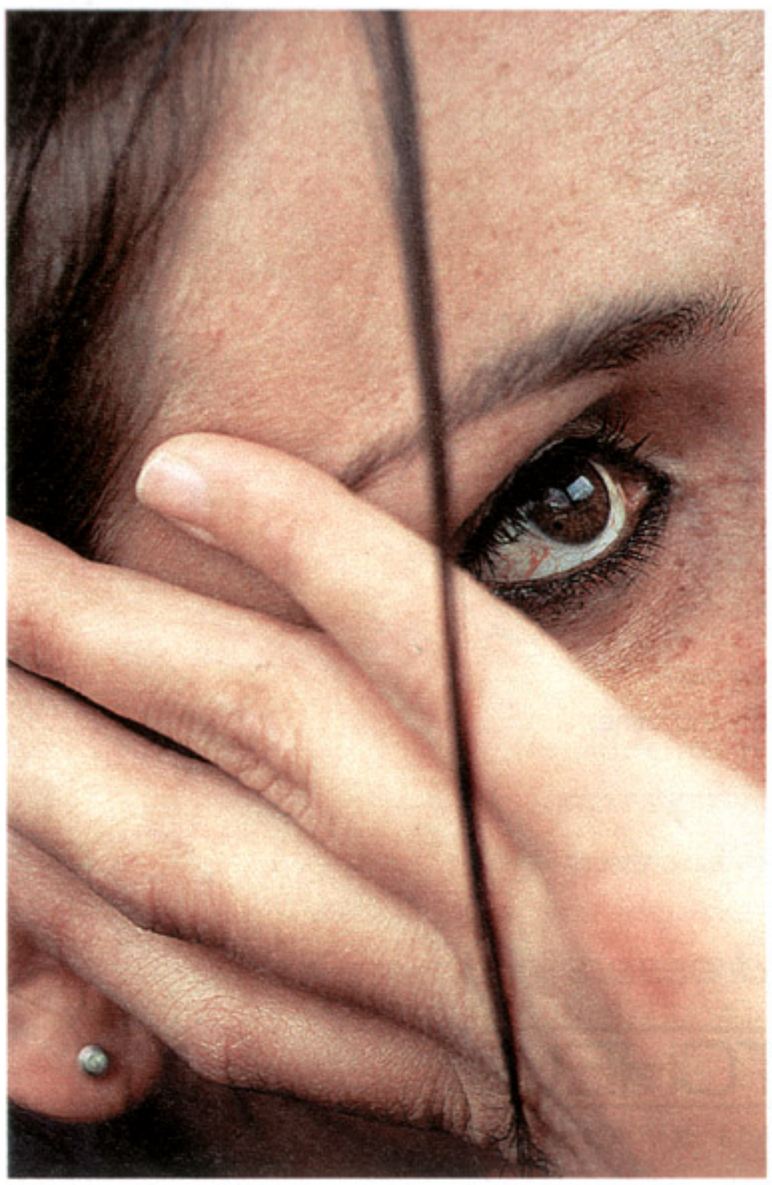
SPEAK NO EVIL, SEE NO SHAME

Hundreds, if not thousands, of Albanian women were kidnapped and systematically raped by Serb forces in Kosovo. Few have been willing to speak out. Now some are breaking their silence. But does anyone want to know? Investigation by Christine Toomey. Photographs: Harriet Logan



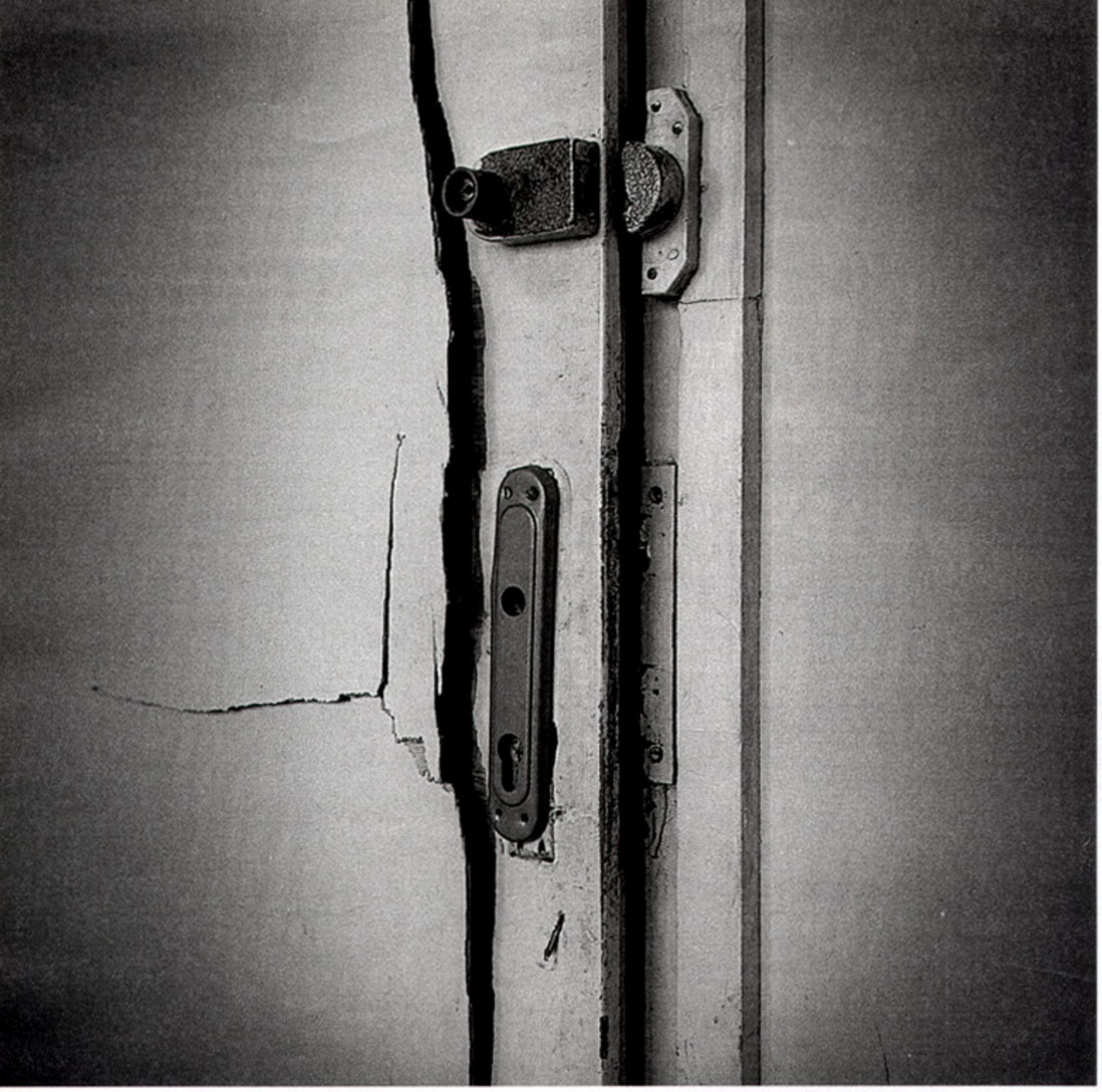
Drita feels her hold on life is fragile. Lying curled beneath a pile of blankets in the damp and darkened room of her mother's small house in Gjakova, western Kosovo, the frail teenager mutters the same phrase again and again: *"Trupi m'lëshon... Trupi m'lëshon"* – my body is leaving me. Divorcing her mind from her body, trying to deny the pain she feels, is the only way the 17-year-old can cope with the experience she has been through. If nothing is done to help her soon, Drita will almost certainly will herself to die.

The bare outlines of what happened to this young ethnic Albanian are sketched out by her elder sister, who sits crouched on the floor beside her bed. For three months, Drita was kept handcuffed in a tiny attic above a busy bar in Gjakova by a notoriously brutal Serb policeman. She was beaten so badly that her arms have withered; fractures to her ribs and scars from knife wounds on her torso are still visible. She was fed a cocktail of drugs, from which she still suffers withdrawal symptoms, and she was raped repeatedly.

Like many victims of sexual violence, Drita (her name and those of other rape victims in this story have been changed for their own protection) has never spoken of the crimes committed against her to anyone outside a small circle of friends and family. But now she wants the man she claims is responsible for torturing her to be brought to trial.

Drita's mother helps prop the teenager up in bed, then leaves to make strong, sweet coffee. She cannot bear to listen as her daughter begins to talk. "I had ➳

Opposite: Merita, 22, who was forced to march for several days, then raped by two paramilitaries, one after the other. This page: the Agimi warehouse in Gjakova, which is suspected of being used by Serb forces as a rape camp. A bloodstained noose hangs from one of the rafters



'He told me to take my clothes off and lay down in the rubble' TEUTA

been married to my husband for three months... We were very happy. I loved him very much... That day we'd gone out to buy bread," Drita recalls of the hot summer afternoon in late August 1998, a time when few in the town ventured out of doors unless driven by necessity.

After Slobodan Milosevic revoked Kosovo's autonomous status in 1989 to subjugate the region's ethnic Albanian majority, Serbia's campaign of repression in the province grew steadily worse. Gjakova became a special target; lying close to the border with Albania, its population was 98% ethnic Albanian and it was a well-known recruiting ground for the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) that had been fighting for independence for more than two years. That summer, Serb tanks, dangling children's toys on wires from their gun turrets, patrolled Gjakova's narrow medieval streets.

Police stations in every neighbourhood blasted out Serb nationalist songs. Ethnic Albanians were stopped at will, arrested and tortured. Many were never heard of again. That afternoon, Drita's husband became one of them; when the couple stepped out from the bakery he was stopped by Serb policemen who accused him of buying bread for the KLA. He was beaten in front of his wife and led away. She has heard nothing of him since.

Wandering the streets in a daze, Drita shortly afterwards met a woman who appeared to want to help her. "Her name was Jasmina. She was from Prizren. She was a Serb, but she spoke Albanian... She could see I was very upset. She invited me for a coffee," says Drita, who now believes she was set up and that the woman dropped a sedative in her coffee. The next thing she remembers is coming to in another bar called the Bikrija, in a suburb of Gjakova called Piskota. According to those who live close to the bar – after the war it was destroyed by ethnic Albanians – the Bikrija was frequented only by Serbs, many of them policemen. It was owned by a Serb named Milloje Draskovic. His brother Lazar was a well-known thug, a commander with the much feared Serb Ministry of Interior Police.

In certain areas of Gjakova, nearly everyone has a story to tell about Lazar Draskovic, a short, balding policeman who was rarely seen in the company of his pretty, blonde wife and baby daughter. Draskovic drank too much and would cruise the streets of the town in his dark blue Audi, stopping youngsters and demanding to see their papers. Parents report being forced to hand over large sums of money to Draskovic so that their sons and daughters would not be arrested and beaten.

"I had seen Lazar Draskovic before in the town. I was very beautiful. Maybe I was attractive to him," says Drita. It was Draskovic, she says, who handcuffed her and dragged her to the attic above the bar. "He beat me... He gave me many drugs, injections and pills. He said, 'I will make a Serb woman of you.' I did not agree... He raped me many times." Sometimes, Drita says, she was dragged back down to the bar and forced to sit there, heavily drugged, while customers poked fun at her. "My mother came and begged him to release me. He beat my mother and did not let me speak to her... For my sake, my mother stayed in hospital for two months. She has a weak heart," says Drita. "Later, my mother came again with my sister. But still he did not let me go."

After months of abuse, Drita attempted suicide. She swallowed a combination of shampoo and pills left lying in the room where she was held. Daunted perhaps by the prospect of having to deal with a corpse, her captor took her to the local hospital, where Serb doctors refused to treat her.

But an Albanian nurse did what she could for her, then called her mother and sister to come and take her into hiding. When Nato started its bombing campaign on March 24 this year, her family disguised Drita as an old woman and took turns carrying her for four days until they reached Albania. Once there, her sister says, Drita was taken to a hospital where Italian doctors offered to fly her to Italy for better treatment. Afraid to let her daughter out of her sight again, her mother refused. When Milosevic pulled his troops out of Kosovo, Drita was driven back to Gjakova in an ambulance. Since then, she has spent her days confined to her mother's house, where she lies staring into space and refusing food. A glucose drip hangs from the crumbling wall above her bed. Beside her lies a plastic bag full of medicines – brought to her by a female KLA soldier who visits her regularly – though her family has little idea what any of the drugs are for.

There are signs that Drascovic carried out more such abuses during the months that followed. He is believed by the KLA to have been among a group of Serb police and paramilitaries billeted, during Nato's bombing campaign, at a food warehouse on the outskirts of Gjakova. Even now the Agimi warehouse is a chilling place. Piled against one wall are hundreds of mildewed Serb uniforms and combat boots with their owner's names carefully written inside. In the centre, hanging from a metal rafter, is a bloodstained noose. Beneath it lie a few items of make-up, including a tube of mascara. This is one of many sites suspected by Kosovans of being used as a rape camp by Serb forces during the war.

Former neighbours believe Draskovic is now in hiding with his family in Montenegro's coastal resort of Budva. During the last days of fighting in Gjakova, he appeared at the door of his neighbour Sebaidin Zeinoulahu, a musician, and handed over the keys to his flat, saying: "If I'm not back in three months you can keep the lot."

No investigator has so far taken a testimony from Drita. According to staff at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague (ICTY), any "suspected low-level perpetrators" such as Draskovic would most likely be investigated by overworked staff at the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), now in charge of the province's only working police force, made up of police officers from 38 different countries. A Swedish spokesman for UNMIK would not comment on whether an arrest warrant has been issued for the former police commander.

War crimes investigators claim the cultural reluctance to discuss the extent to which rape was used as a weapon of war and tool of ethnic cleansing by Serb forces in Kosovo – beginning long before Nato dropped its first payload of bombs on the province, as Drita's statement attests – is the main obstacle hampering attempts to bring those responsible to justice. It is certainly a huge difficulty. But the testimonies of women interviewed for this story suggest that it may not be the chief obstacle. In a deeply traditional, predominantly Muslim society trying to tackle and tear down one of its deepest taboos – that discussion of sex, let alone rape, is shameful – there are signs of change.

Yet these gradual shifts in attitude are being ignored by some international aid agencies – dozens of whom have flocked to Kosovo since Milosevic pulled his troops out of the province on June 12, 1999. Too much emphasis, it seems, is being placed on the humiliation women feel about their wartime experiences. ➠

Opposite: a smashed door in the Elektromotori factory, where women and children were maltreated. Doors were kicked down by Serb police. This page: Teuta, 22, with her son Kreshnik, with whom she was pregnant at the time of her rape. Her mother-in-law was murdered while she was being attacked

Right: shoes left outside a cattleshed in Ciret, where several women were raped. Below: Sevdije Ahmeti, who has set up a protection centre for women and children

This sense of shame is being used as an excuse for the difficulties aid workers are experiencing in finding and helping Kosovo's rape victims.

Two days after speaking to Drita, we encountered a British aid worker at Pristina airport, who explained he had arrived in the province some months before with the authority to sponsor "psychosocial programmes" – including assistance for rape victims. But, he said, he had not encountered many. If any women had talked to us about their experiences, the middle-aged man speculated, we must have paid them to do so. "This whole rape issue seems exaggerated," he concluded. Had he been to Ciret or Kozhic? I asked. He had not.

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Ciret and Kozhic are villages just a few miles apart in the Drenica region of central Kosovo. Like most small communities throughout the province, nearly every house has been gutted by fire, leaving their inhabitants to shelter in one room weatherproofed with blue nylon sheeting. Huddled on the floor of one such house in Kozhic, Teuta says she has been told by her husband she should feel no fear in talking about what happened to the women of the village on the night of April 19.

The 22-year-old talks quietly, but calmly, constantly hugging her knees, as she describes how women and children were first evicted from their homes by Serb police on April 6. The police had started randomly shooting villagers and dragging their bodies into the street as a warning to others of what would happen if they did not do as they were told. Teuta was six months pregnant and forced to march day and night with her two-year-old son, her 20-year-old sister, her mother and mother-in-law, together with hundreds of others from neighbouring villages, cross-country to the industrial town of Gllogovc. In a moment when they were left, she and a group of 26 friends and relatives escaped and made it back to their homes. But they were caught again. This time they were told they would be taken to the mosque in Ciret "for their own safekeeping".

Once in Ciret, however, the women and children were hustled into a small cattleshed by Serb policemen who debated among themselves whether the group should have their throats cut or be "fried like meat". "Then three men in camouflage uniforms came up to us," recalls Teuta. "They pointed guns at us and demanded money and gold. We gave them whatever we had. Then they started taking women outside."

Teuta says the men's uniforms had tiger emblems on the sleeves – a sinister detail since it was paramilitaries loyal to the indicted war criminal Zeljko Raznatovic, known as Arkan's Tigers, who were held responsible for some of the worst cases of mass rape in Bosnia, where, according to conservative estimates, 20,000 women were raped during three years of war (the ICTY has so far convicted five men of sexual crimes). "First the girls were taken, those who did not have children," Teuta continues. "They were kept outside for 30 minutes. When they were brought back we knew they had been tortured. Their clothes were a mess. I asked them what had happened. But they could not tell us... Then they started taking those of us who had children."

Teuta was ordered to hand her son over to her mother and was taken outside to a derelict building: "There were three men. One of them took me. He had a big knife. He asked me, 'Do you want to do this with me or am I going to slit open your stomach?' He had a gun at my throat... He kept me for 10 or 15 minutes. He touched me in a very bad way," says Teuta, who, like others I spoke to, does not say the word "rape"; instead words such as "touch", "torture" and "maltreat" are widely used with a clear meaning. Teuta says she was then released and ordered to comfort her son, who was screaming.

'The tortures were so unbearable I asked, "Please kill us"'

SEVDIJE AHMETI

"They brought him out to me and left him with me for a few minutes until he calmed down. Then they took the baby away from me again and the other soldier took me to the same place. He tortured me in the same way. He told me to take off my clothes and lay down in the rubble. He took off his clothes and in that moment I fainted. When I regained consciousness he was over me and he was laughing... Then he ordered me to get out."

When she went back to the shed, five other young women, including her sister and a group of three other sisters, aged 16, 20 and 27, were missing. Also gone were three older women, including the three sisters' 50-year-old mother and Teuta's 60-year-old mother-in-law. "The three older women were killed straight away because we heard three shootings," says Teuta, who describes how a Serb policeman eventually brought milk for her son and told the rest of the group to leave immediately. The survivors made their way back to Kozhic, where Teuta two months later gave birth to her second son, Kreshnik – Albanian for Brave.

It was not until late June that eight bodies – those of Teuta's sister, her sister's closest friend, Zahide Xhema, 19, the three other sisters and the three older women – were found stuffed down three water wells in Ciret. French forensic experts removed the bodies, and the ICTY is investigating the crime. But the victims' families are angry that they have not been told how the women died; they believe some of the younger women were thrown down the wells alive. Braced against the cutting winds that sweep in early autumn across the slopes of the Cicavica mountains where Ciret and Kozhic are situated, Zahide Xhema's father, Gjemal, prods his umbrella at the remnants of the well where his daughter was found. "They did not allow me to see my ⟶

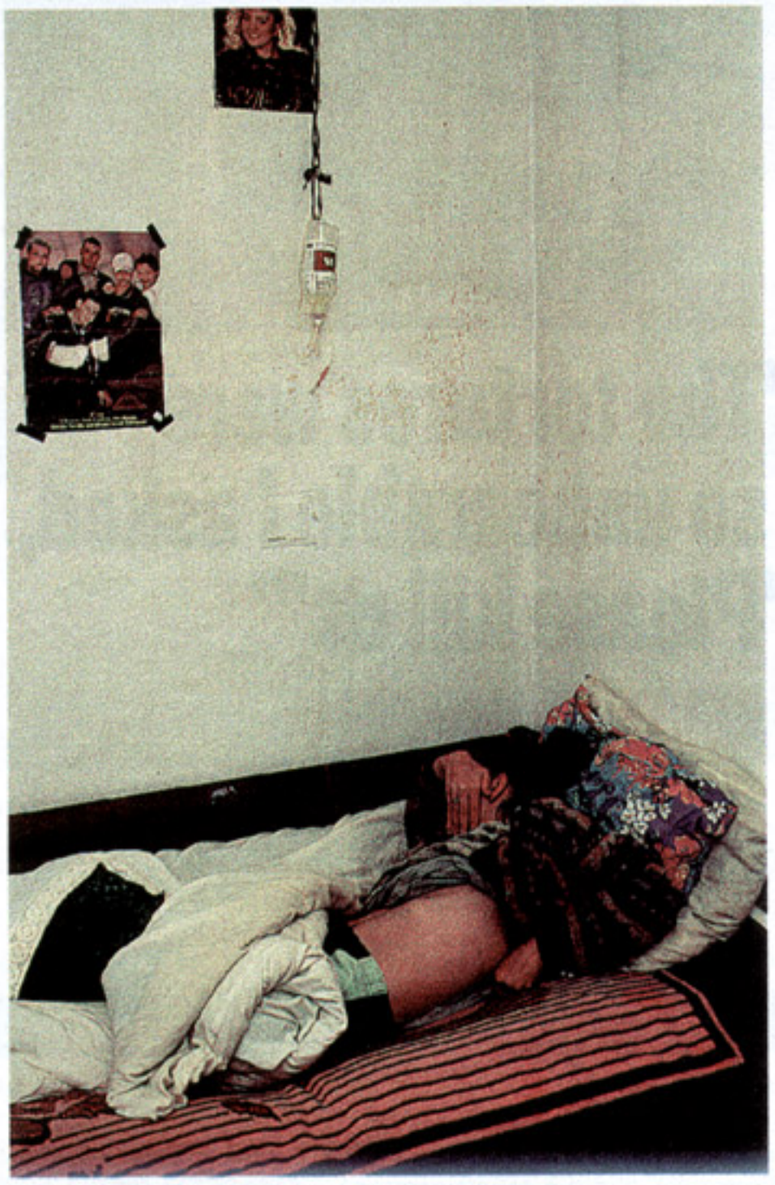
'My mother begged him to release me. He beat my mother and didn't let me speak to her' DRITA

daughter's body. Her mother had to identify her by her clothing. We thought our wives and children would be safe when we were chased like rabbits into the mountains by Serbs."

As he listens to his wife, Hajrije – also held with another younger daughter in the cattleshed – talk about Zahide, Gjemal becomes agitated: "I want everyone to know what happened to my daughter and the other women who died. They were raped," says the 50-year-old farmer. "I send a message to every Albanian woman: if they were raped, then everyone should know that happened. We could not protect them. They were in Serb hands... They must tell the truth. Let them talk about it so the world can know what they have suffered."

While Hajrije starts to wail and rock to and fro, her husband continues: "Men must accept that these girls have suffered and accept them as if nothing happened to them. Men must accept the girls as virgins, no matter that they have been raped." His comments relate to a code of conduct dating back to the 15th century, the basic principles of which are still observed by many in this traditional society. According to the Kanun of Lek Dukagjin, women should be "encouraged" to consider suicide if raped, or leave the community and, if married, risk being divorced by their husbands and forced to abandon their children.

Changes to such deep-seated notions of dishonour are hard to make. But some believe that the war has brought about important changes in mentality. Myzafere Ibishaga, 55, a former schoolteacher who now counsels



Right: Hajrije Xhema, mother of Zahide, whose body was found stuffed down a well. Left: the victims were told to smarten themselves up with hairbrushes and combs before being raped. Below left: Drita, 17, in her mother's house following a three-month ordeal of being handcuffed and abused by a Serb policeman. She is now on a glucose drip, and drifts in and out of consciousness. Page 40: a deserted building alongside the cattleshed in Ciret where a group of women were held at gunpoint

traumatised women for the French organisation Médicins Sans Frontières in the western town of Peje, is optimistic: "Before the war, a girl who was raped would have consequences for the rest of her life. She would be for ever isolated... Now I don't believe it is going to be like that... People are talking about this problem more than ever before... I don't think it is going to be so difficult for men to change their attitudes, because every family that had a girl over 12 lived with the fear that this would happen to her during the war."

The slow change in attitude, Myzafere argues, is also a result of the fact that many families are now headed by women whose husbands and other male relatives have been killed or are missing: "Women who depended on their husbands for everything have got to begin a new life, find a job... Some have never learned to read or write." Myzafere, together with other teachers, is setting up adult literacy programmes for war widows. While in the past, traditional attitudes prevailed most strongly in

'Every family with a girl over 12 feared that this would happen' MYZAFERE IBISHAGA

rural areas, where arranged marriages are still common and women are expected to confine themselves to the home, there are signs that some of these tight-knit rural communities are offering more support to traumatised women than can be found in the province's towns and cities. This is certainly Merita's experience.

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Merita's family home lies at the end of a dirt track that runs behind a cluster of high-rise flats in a town in Drenica. Because of the public nature of what happened to her, the tall, shy 22-year-old does not want her real name or location revealed. She feels many already gossip behind her back: "Some feel I do not display a great enough sense of shame about what happened to me...

"I always had a feeling that something would happen to me in the war," says Merita of the night of April 14, when she, her mother, sister and six brothers were forced to flee their homes. They were herded into a convoy together with thousands of ethnic Albanians and frogmarched for days and nights on end by Serb police until they reached the outskirts of Peje, where the convoy was stopped by paramilitaries demanding money and jewellery. Afraid that her younger brother would be arrested, as were thousands of young men accused of being KLA soldiers, Merita's family tried to disguise the 18-year-old as a young woman by tying a scarf round his head. When suspicious paramilitaries tore away the scarf, Merita and an older cousin bore the brunt of their rage. The two young women were bundled into a car by the paramilitaries and driven a few metres away from the convoy onto a rough track. First they were ordered to hand over their jewellery. "I was shaking so much I couldn't unfasten the gold chain around my neck. One paramilitary shone a torch in my face and told me if I broke it he would kill me," recalls Merita. "I could hear my mother screaming. I was ordered by the paramilitary to get out of the car and take off my clothes... Then he started slapping me and screaming at me and pushed me further away from the track... He asked me, 'Are you a virgin? Do you have a boyfriend? Is it good to have sex with us?'... Then he said, 'I am going to make a woman of you'... I couldn't stand the pain... I was screaming and grabbing the ground. It was wet with my own blood.

"While he was still over me, another man came with a mask on his face and said, 'Why are you treating her ⟶

so good? Shut the bitch's mouth.' Then the man who raped me ran away and said to the other one, 'You take her now. But hurry, the commander is calling for us.' The man with the mask raped me the same way." Merita says she was then told to put her clothes back on: "In exactly the same way as they had been before. I was very weak. He kicked me as I tried to stand... When I got back to the line, my uncle shut my mouth with his hand. He was crying... He knew what had happened to me. My cousin was also back... She'd been through the same thing."

Merita says she could hear people whispering to each other: "It's obvious what they have done to them." She starts crying: "I didn't want to live after that... I can't sleep. Every time I close my eyes I see them... Now I don't go out. I feel inferior."

Merita says that before the war she was sure she would be happy one day, meet a good man and get married. "But now I don't think about getting married. I think about getting a job and having my own life." She would like a job working with children, she says, because "being with children helps calm me down".

Even though what happened to Merita is well known in her community and she has told local human rights workers in her town that she would be willing to testify in court, she has not been visited by ICTY war crimes investigators. She has been offered no help or counselling by any of the international organisations focused on aiding women in Kosovo.

With over 400 suspected mass grave sites to investigate in this small mountainous province – less than half the size of Wales – investigators have been concentrating on gathering forensic evidence and testimonies from those desperate to bear witness to the atrocities they have seen. Less vocal victims like Drita, Teuta and Merita are, therefore, slipping through the net. So far, only five public indictments for war crimes against humanity in Kosovo – against Milosevic and four of his top officials – have been issued by the ICTY.

Systematic sexual violence by Serb forces is not one of the crimes included in the charges against them. "But just because there has been no public indictment issued on sexual offences, doesn't mean one isn't coming," says Kelly Moore, the spokeswoman for the ICTY in Pristina. "We would ask that people be patient and appreciate that an investigation of this size is going to take time," she says, hinting that sealed indictments – based on information that is only revealed when the individual concerned has been arrested, and "used in Bosnia to great success" – could be issued against those at risk of fleeing the jurisdiction of authorities with the power to arrest them.

Since Serb troops withdrew from Kosovo, there has been a rash of revenge killings of Serb civilians, who either chose to stay in the province or had no other place to go. There have also been reports of ethnic Albanians raping Serb women in retaliation for abuses before and during the war. The wife of one former KLA fighter, who aid workers suspect may have been raped by Serb paramilitaries, boasted to me of how her son had raped a Serb. Such incidents of violence, while indefensible, are, so far, isolated cases dwarfed by the scale of abuse perpetrated by the Serbs.

According to Moore, sexual violence, whether against ethnic Albanians or Serbs, is being given high priority by war crimes investigators. Since the suspension of forensic work, due to worsening weather conditions at the end of October, investigators have concentrated on interviewing witnesses. But Moore states: "Generally speaking, when it comes to sexual offences and sexual crimes against women, investigators say these are very difficult crimes to investigate. This is because of the stigma that is attached to being raped, particularly in a conservative society such as this one, where many of the victims are unwilling to come forward, particularly if they know it is going to require testifying in a trial."

'Every time I close my eyes I see them. Now I don't go out' MERITA

But this is not the full story. Even when women have spoken to local organisations or human rights workers, there appears to be no clear mechanism for passing on their testimonies to the appropriate authorities. There was also little evidence of a co-ordinated strategy by international agencies to work together and through local community groups to actively seek out women who want to talk.

Moore stresses that the ICTY would provide security "as necessary and where appropriate" to any rape victim required as a war crimes trial witness. Yet one woman whose testimony has been passed on to the ICTY, and who could be called as a witness at a future trial, has been smuggled out of the province and provided safe haven in another country by a Kosovan organisation, not the ICTY. The 21-year-old, permanently scarred with bite marks all over her chest, states in her handwritten testimony that she was taken out of a convoy by three policemen and held in a building where she was stripped and had one of her legs tied to a chair, the other to a table. "They tied my right hand to a radiator, then gave me a drink," she writes. "Then the policeman with long hair started his sexual rape... After 10 minutes another came... He also raped me." More policemen followed.

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"The Serbs knew what they were doing when they attacked women. They knew that they would attack the honour of our nation. It was a well-performed and well-planned strategy," says Sevdije Ahmeti, the co-founder of the Centre for the Protection of Women and Children, a Kososvan network established in Pristina long before the outbreak of war. "There was one-off rape, long-term rape and raping camps; one person raping, many persons raping, for half an hour, hours or days."

The abuse, she says, followed similar patterns: women would be plucked from convoys; often they were offered a comb or hairbrush to tidy themselves up "as a form of mental torture to signal what was going to happen... If they refused, which they did, they would be beaten up."

Sevdije then handed me a typewritten note left by Serb paramilitaries in a house suspected of being used as a rape camp in Pristina. It concludes: "We Cetniks want to tell you that we f***ed and raped lots of your Albanian women. So now they will bear lovely Serb children." Most doctors, counsellors and aid workers I spoke to stress that they do not believe there will be many babies born to women raped during the war. They say women impregnated sought abortions, some travelling to distant hospitals in search of anonymity, some resorting to illegal clinics.

Sevdije, a 54-year-old grandmother, is an earnest-looking academic with grey hair and gentle eyes. Like most of the country's ethnic Albanians, she was dismissed from her job – she was chief bibliographer at the National University Library – when Kosovo's constitution was abolished in 1989. Disgusted at Serb propaganda aimed at ethnic Albanian women, Sevdije started writing editorials in protest to local newspapers and magazines.

As violence in the province escalated, she helped found the Centre for the Protection of Women and Children to provide basic health services for women and collect data on human rights abuses. "Police rapes started at this time. But people were very reluctant to report it... It was a psychological war of fear and intimidation... We received the testimony of one mother in May 1998 who said her two daughters were raped by Yugoslav army forces. Afterwards the girls, aged 13 and 14, felt ashamed that they had dishonoured their families. They committed suicide by throwing themselves from high rocks near their village."

Since the war, Sevdije stresses the work of the centre has become less academic: "I don't want only to interview people and present how big are their human rights violations. Now I want to protect people. I want to find ways to solve the problems in their lives." The reason for the change, Sevdije says, is what happened to her on the night of May 4 this year: "I was listening to Radio Free Europe. It was 3 o'clock in the morning. Dark. I was hiding in my sister's house. The house was shaking. I thought it was the Nato bombing. Then another 'boom'. My husband said, 'I think they broke the door.' We heard the glass falling... They just shouted, 'Police!' They had masks on their faces... My husband called me, 'Come downstairs.' But one of them, very tall, put a gun up my backside... I was bleeding... He was torturing me... I call it gun rape."

For 3½ hours, Sevdije says she, her sister and their husbands were kept in a room and beaten. "The tortures were so unbearable I asked, 'Please kill us.' When they left, people helped us... My husband and I were separated... I was taken to an animal stall... I stayed there day and night in fear... After 10 days I was reunited with my husband. He said, 'Please don't tell people you were tortured'... After I had a bath I wiped the steam from the mirror and saw my face covered in bruises. I said, 'How can you expect me to say nothing happened? Shall I say you beat me?'"

For the rest of the war Sevdije remained in hiding. Since June she has concentrated on providing medical help and counselling for dozens of raped women. But, she argues, this is not enough. She has more ambitious plans. "I want women to have their dignity back. I bring them to the river. I want to see them crossing the river and being safe behind it." To do this, she stresses, it is essential to create new job opportunities for women in Kosovo. She hopes to set up 14 regional centres throughout the province to which women who need help can come initially for counselling, but also to seek work. In urban areas she is seeking funding to revitalise textile factories, laundries and fast-food outlets. In rural areas she wants to provide small loans for farming projects, so women can learn to support themselves. "We have to train them, open their eyes and give them hope."

Sevdije has received limited funding for her plans from a Swedish women's organisation and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). A whole range of aid projects, aimed at women, are being funded by the UNHCR through a programme called the Kosovar Women's Initiative. They include counselling for traumatised women and limited vocational training, such as computer literacy and sewing classes organised through Oxfam. But, Sevdije argues, such programmes do not go far enough and lack co-ordination. ⋙→

"My feeling is organisations are competing with each other for data. More than trying to help women, they are trying to see who has more cases [of raped women] to treat... You can't import a pattern of treatment... They are trying to help. But all the work of these organisations has to go through an interpreter. It drags out the trauma. We don't really have any information about what these outside organisations are doing. Nobody is really sharing information... They don't want to co-operate with me. But they want me to co-operate with them."

In Gjakova alone – a town the size of Torquay – 55 nongovernmental organisations are now working in different fields. "All are too busy building up their own operations to have much time to spare talking to each other," says Giesele Endel of Medica Mondiale, a German organisation that won international acclaim for its work with rape victims in Bosnia.

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Caution needs to be exercised about any estimates of the number of rape victims in Kosovo. There is now widespread recognition and anger that Nato exaggerated claims of the numbers of Kosovars killed to whip up public support for its bombing campaigns. Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, for instance, came in for criticism when he alleged, during Nato's bombing campaign, that an army barracks in Gjakova was being used as a rape camp by Serbs. Some felt the timing of such a highly emotive charge – the day after Nato hit a Serb passenger train south of Belgrade, killing 10 civilians – was aimed at deflecting public outcry over Nato's blunders. Now the ICTY will only say it is investigating several suspected rape camps in the town. It will not say which they are, only that the Agimi warehouse, where Lazar Draskovic was billeted, is not one of them.

Other sites in Gjakova, however, where women are believed to have been mistreated include the cellar of a

'They had bloodstains on their clothes. We were all praying'

farmhouse in the suburb of Osek Hile– where women's petticoats, scarves and shoes can still be found with bloodstained cardboard scattered on the floor alongside an electric shaver lying amid small piles of what look like pubic hair – and the Elektromotori electrical engineering factory on the outskirts of Gjakova, where around 600 women, children and elderly men were held as human shields from May 10 to 13.

The factory was close to a large Serb military barracks. Those held at the factory talk of women being taken away and brought back in great distress. Yet a gynaecologist called to the factory to give emergency assistance to women there says he and other doctors – who report that wounded Serb soldiers they treated admitted using LSD – have been threatened with violence by relatives of rape victims if they talk about how women were mistreated in the town.

Women held at the factory will only talk about what happened to others there: "Young women were taken away and, when they came back, their faces were bright red. They had bloodstains on their clothes... We were all praying, 'Let this not happen to me,'" said a war widow receiving counselling, held at the factory for two days.

Shkendije Hoda, of the KLA in Gjakova, claims she has a list of 70 local women known to have been raped in Gjakova during the 80 days Nato's bombing campaign lasted and in the months leading up to it. She believes the real figure is nearer to 500. Hoda, who has two brothers, four cousins and a nephew still missing, believes that one of the main reasons people are particularly reluctant to talk about what happened in Gjakova is because of the fear those held in Serb prisons will suffer. The International Committee for the Red Cross has details of 1871 men and women arrested in Kosovo and held in jails in Serbia and confirms that more people from Gjakova are unaccounted for than from any other area in the province.

Hoda's assertion is borne out by others. "There are so many still in Serb hands, we are afraid if we give our names and tell what happened they will be punished," said another woman held as a prisoner at the Elektromotori factory, whose son is still missing. "Nato saved our lives, and for that we thank you. But we'll only be able to tell the truth once the prisoners are released."

On the basis of dozens of interviews with women throughout the province, there seems little doubt that rape was used widely and systematically as a weapon of war in Kosovo. In addition to Drita's, Teuta's and Merita's testimonies, the anguish of young women who had almost certainly been raped but could not yet bring themselves to talk about it remains haunting. One hollow-eyed young woman, held together with her mother and 23 others by Serb paramilitaries for 65 days, sat trembling and yanking at the sleeves of her jumper in an attempt to conceal the bandages on her wrists as her mother insisted: "I know people are talking about her... Nothing happened to my daughter."

But this is not a numbers game. Unlike the death toll in Kosovo, which will, one day, be established accurately, the number of rape victims will almost certainly never be known. Whether there are hundreds or thousands, however, their needs are urgent and are not being addressed adequately. As Sevdije concludes: "There is nothing we can do for those who died. But if we do nothing to help many of these women, they will become the living dead of this war." ■